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Vol. II.

THE TICKET-OF-LEAVE'S TRICK.

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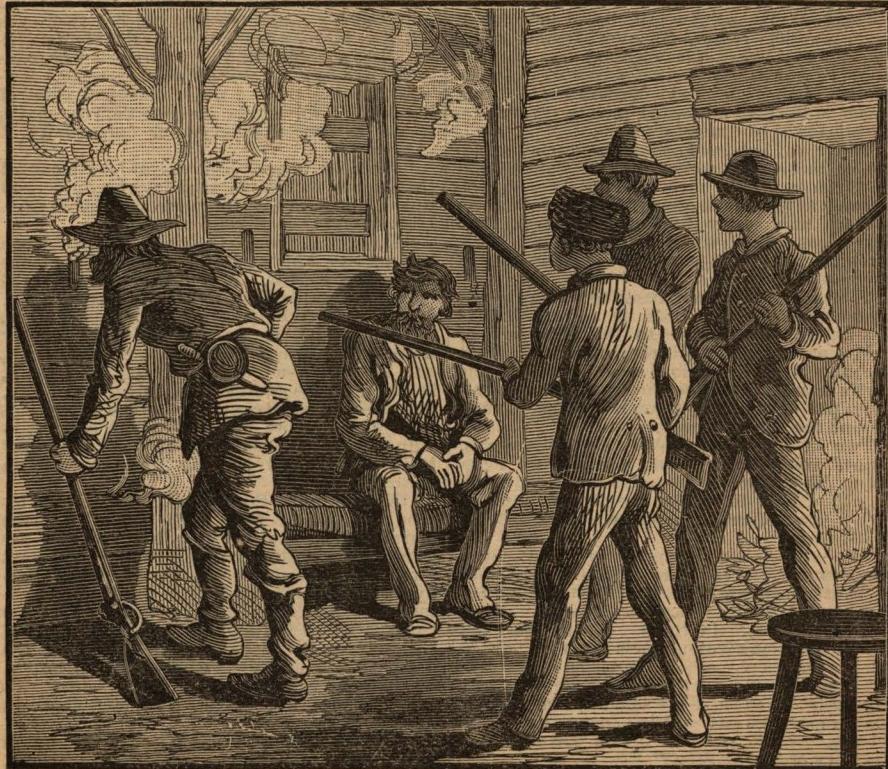
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BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.



"THE P'IZEN IMPS MEAN TO ROAST US ALIVE!" CRIED MARIPOSA MARSH.

The Ticket-of-Leave's Trick;

OR,

Spring Steel, King of the Bush.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.

CHAPTER I.

THE HISTORY OF A NOTED RASCAL.

"The night before Christmas," in the year 1856.

Christmas eve—but not a picture such as those magic words naturally bring before our mental vision. No mantle of snow upon the frozen breast of Mother Earth. No silvery chime of sleigh bells—no trace of Christmas trees—no prospect of holiday sports and feasts.

Instead, a warm, dark night; a forest of trees in foliage; a little company of men and boys squatting around a camp-fire in the land where winter takes the place of summer, where Nature performs the strangest freaks and reverses nearly all of our cherished remembrances; in one word—Australia!

There are three men and an equal number of boys around the camp-fire.

One of the men, a tall, broad-shouldered, huge-bearded fellow, Thomas Dempster by name, a "ticket-of-leave-man," an English convict, who drives a clumsy bullock-dray between Melbourne and Ballarat, freighting goods to the gold mines and picking up such return loads as he can get.

The trio of lads, and one of the men—the oldest of the entire party—are gold-hunters and fast friends. They have had no little experience on the placer diggings of California, from whence, fired by the wonderful tales told of the marvelous discoveries made in Australia, they have journeyed hither to try their fortunes in the new Dorado.

Tobias Marshall is the name to which the old man answers, though both he and his friends are better accustomed to the sobriquet of "Mariposa Marsh." His rightful name partly accounts for this curious *nom de guerre*, the prefix having been given him in California, his principal "stamping-ground" being in and around the Mariposa region.

Two of the boys were brothers, Americans, named respectfully Frank and Harold Freeman. The other lad was also American born, though of Irish descent, as the slight burr plainly indicated whenever he spoke. His name was Matthew Marley.

The last of the company was an entire stranger to the rest, having joined them that same afternoon; a huge, awkward-looking fellow, undeniably an American, who claimed Kentucky as his natal State. He and Mariposa Marsh had been rivaling each other in "drawing the long bow," when Dempster interposed.

"I never could see the sense in lying so outrageously, when there are so many true stories that are strange and exciting enough in all conscience," he said, quietly. "Did you ever hear the story of Spring Steel?"

A negative answer was given, and the youngsters begged him to tell them the story.

"It will sound tame enough beside the yarns you have just heard, but it possesses one attraction which they lacked—that of being truthful in every particular," said Dempster, settling himself in a more comfortable position.

"I knew the fellow well before he was transported and have snared many a hare and pheasant in his company in old England. In fact, he was the remote cause of my being where I now am, for, until I fell in with his way, I was honest, if a little wild. But that does not concern the story I set out to tell you.

"Christopher Kemper was his right name, and he was a man such as you don't often meet; very tall, strong as a bull, but active as a deer. He was one of a party of poachers concerned in a fight when two keepers were killed, and though it could not be proven that he fired any of the fatal shots, his evil reputation told against him, and he was sentenced to be transported for life.

"On board the convict-ship he headed a mutiny which was nipped in the bud by one of the conspirators turning informer, and Kit was landed at Sydney with a black mark against him.

"He was set to work with a ball and chain fastened to each ankle, and those who guarded him and his mates hardly ever took their eyes off him, for he was set down as doubly dangerous; but a lamb could not be meeker or more quiet than he was to all outward seeming. Notwithstanding this, he never once lost sight of his steady resolve to escape, and though months passed without the longed-for opportunity, it came at last.

"His uniform good-behavior at length caused the guards to believe that imprisonment had tamed him, and they began to show more carelessness, so far as he was concerned.

"One day Kit was at work on the dock, when he found that his patiently-watched-for chance had come at last. A fine horse was hitched only a few yards from where he was working, and there were only two guards between him and the animal. He was still wearing his heavy irons, but he grasped the chains near the balls, one in each hand, and watching his chance, leaped upon the guards. He only struck twice, but those blows were sufficient. The two guards went down before him, their skulls crushed to pulp, killed so suddenly that they never realized their danger and had no time to raise an alarm.

"Kemper hung the balls and chains over his shoulders and was fairly in the saddle before the alarm was raised, striking straight for the heart of the bush. A dozen bullets were sent after him, but neither he nor the horse were touched. The mounted police were sent in pursuit, and the next morning they found the horse on which Kit had escaped, dead. It had been ridden to death, and beside it lay the heavy balls, still stained with blood and brains. Kemper had broken the chains close up to the iron rings around his ankles, then continued his flight on foot.

"For many days he was searched for, but in vain. Not a trace of him could be discovered,

and at length it was believed that he had lost himself in the bush, and there perished of starvation.

"A few months later, this belief was shaken, for one after another bold robberies and fiendish murders were committed, and the description of the leading spirit in these atrocities fully coincided with that of Christopher Kemper. And he it was, though now known far and wide as Spring Steel, from his marvelous strength and activity.

"He seemed to have lost all feelings of humanity, and brutal murder followed murder with scarcely the interval of a day. He appeared to shed blood and take life with as little compunction as a butcher displays in slaughtering his four-footed animals. The whole country grew alarmed, for Spring Steel did not hesitate to enter towns like Sydney and even Melbourne for the sake of plunder or of carrying out his schemes of revenge and reprisal. Heavy rewards were offered for his capture, dead or alive, and were increased after each deed of blood until a moderate fortune rested on his head. The mounted police were scouring the country in every direction, night and day, for a commission awaited the one who should kill or capture Spring Steel. But all their efforts were in vain. The fellow was often driven into a trap from which there was, seemingly, no earthly hope of escape, but as often did he slip through the meshes, each time adding to his long list of victims.

"What force alone could not accomplish, was finally wrought by the aid of treachery. The governor caused it to be proclaimed all over the Continent that whoever should be the means of causing the arrest of Spring Steel, should not only receive a munificent reward in money, but all past offenses would be forgiven him, though they consisted of every crime in the decalogue. And this liberal reward thus offered, induced a shepherd who had long been a spy and secret ally of the notorious bushranger, to betray him and serve as guide to the strong force sent out to capture Spring Steel.

"The expedition was not fairly afoot when the whole country was again thrown into a state of intense excitement by the sticking-up of a gold-escort, bound from Ballarat to Melbourne. The soldiers acting as guards, seven in number, were shot down from ambush, and the drivers still more brutally butchered. Then the cart, containing over forty thousand pounds' worth of gold, was driven away by the bushrangers. But before they left, Spring Steel wrote a few lines upon the back of a copy of the governor's proclamation, and pinned it with a knife to the breast of the sergeant who had commanded the gold-escort. Those words, above his name, offered one thousand pounds reward for the head of the governor, whenever delivered to Spring Steel in person!

"The shepherd who had offered to betray his mate was as good as his word, though this last exploit, of which he declared he had been wholly ignorant, caused a delay of a few days. But then he sent word that the bushrangers were back again at their old hiding-place, and he guided a strong force to it.

"The surprise was complete. The gang was

surrounded before a shot was fired, and at the signal every man save Spring Steel was shot dead in his tracks. Not a weapon had been aimed at the chief, who was to be taken alive, in order to force him to confess where the gold taken from the escort was hidden. And though he fought as only a man can fight who knows capture means hanging, killing two of the police outright, besides wounding several others, Spring Steel was finally overpowered and taken prisoner.

"He only opened his lips once, and that was to curse the treacherous shepherd who had betrayed him; and though the police toasted him before the fire until his skin cracked, in order to make him confess, they could not wring a word from his lips.

"The next morning they set out with their prisoner for Melbourne; but when they halted for noon, Spring Steel burst his bonds, and leaping upon the nearest horse, which chanced to be the best one of the lot, dashed away from the police and finally eluded their pursuit, though it was plain that more than one of their bullets had struck him, from the bloody trail he left behind him.

"Two weeks later a skeleton was found in the bush, which was generally believed to be the remains of the wounded bushranger, and the man who betrayed him received the promised reward and an unconditional pardon. He was a shrewd, long-headed fellow, and doubted the truth of the bushranger's death. Knowing that if Spring Steel was living, there would be no safety for him in Australia, he made preparations for departing in search of a more congenial climate, only awaiting the sailing of a vessel in which he secured passage.

"But he was fated to never leave Australia, for his suspicions that Spring Steel was yet living, were only too well founded on fact.

"The very night before the vessel in which he had engaged a berth was to leave the harbor, he was assailed, bound and carried off by Spring Steel himself.

"I was then freighting on this same route, and in the dead of night I was aroused from sleep by the most horrible cries and screams I ever heard or ever expect to hear again. I knew that there was some deviltry going on, but I was alone and unarmed, and did not dare leave my dray to investigate the matter.

"The next morning a squad of mounted police met me, and I told them what I had heard. They obliged me to turn back to guide them, and an hour later we reached the spot where a living man had been bound to a huge ant-hill!

"Living when bound there, for it must have been his screams of agony that I heard, but dead enough now, since there remained nothing save his bare bones!

"He had been eaten alive by the millions of ants!

"A paper was fastened near by, which revealed the mystery of who he was and why he had been doomed to such a horrible fate. That note was signed by Spring Steel, and stated the crime for which the traitor had been condemned--for the skeleton was all that remained of the false shepherd!"

"Spring Steel is still living, and no man's name inspires greater terror in this region than does his. The story I have told you is literally true, and if you are wise men you will pray that you and he may never meet," concluded the ticket-of-leave-man, arising and unfolding his blanket preparatory to turning in for the night.

"I wouldn't ax no easier way o' makin' a 'pendent fortin' then by pickin' this pizen critter up an' totin' him back to town fer a pinny-poppy-show!" affirmed Kentuck, with a ferocious roll of his whisky-bleared eyes and savage clash of his strong, tobacco-stained teeth.

Dempster turned toward the speaker with a sneer, but the words upon his tongue's end were checked by a truly startling sound.

Floating through the still night there came a prolonged cry of either terror or pain—as though the ghost of the murdered shepherd had been awakened from the quiet of its unhallowed grave by the recital of his frightful doom!

CHAPTER II.

"STUCK-UP BY BUSHRANGERS."

THAT those prolonged cries were uttered by the uneasy ghost of the hapless victim of Spring Steel's diabolical vengeance, was undeniably the first thought of the little party gathered around the smoldering campfire.

Coming so soon after the tragic story told by the lips of one who had been an ear, if not an eye, witness to the horrible punishment, and being so near the very spot, this feeling was natural enough, though it died almost as soon as born.

"Hark!" exclaimed Mariposa Marsh, as the prolonged, wailing cry came to their ears on the favoring night breeze. "Thar is somebody in trouble out yender! They're cryin' fer help, an' here we stan' doin' nothin', like ign'ant heathen 'stead o' white men. Look to your weepoms, boys, an' le's make a break!"

"Better still—take my advice and stay right where you are," said Dempster as he stirred up the failing fire and resumed his former position upon the ground.

"With those cries for help ringing in our ears?" indignantly cried Frank Freeman. "I'd be ashamed to show my face in any honest company if I failed to answer such an appeal! There may be murder doing—"

"If there is, all would be over long before you could find your way to that spot; but the cries don't sound that way to me," coolly observed Dempster, not arising nor showing by any change of countenance that he was at all affected by the generous indignation of the chivalric youth.

"If you listen closely, you will find that there is little or no difference between the separate cries. They are uttered by the same throat, and come from about, if not exactly the same spot. Now if the one who utters those cries was lost in the bush, his voice would not be stationary—he would be wandering from spot to spot, for the man who is fairly lost in that way, is afraid to stand still."

"Then, again, the voice of any person in ex-

tremity of pain or terror is ever changing in tone, never the same twice in succession. There are men who could explain this fact, and give you the scientific reasons, but that goes beyond my skill. I only know that the fact is a fact, and that the voice we hear out yonder is neither that of a human being lost in the bush nor of one in great peril or pain," logically argued the ticket-of-leave-man.

Despite themselves his hearers were impressed by the calm reasoning of Dempster, though they were not willing to admit as much; and Frank added:

"How do you explain those cries, then? They are surely uttered by a human being, and form an earnest appeal for help."

"Bushrangers!" was the laconic response of the convict; but seeing that this explanation was not fully understood by his companions, he added: "It wouldn't be the first time I have known such a trick to be played, and successfully, too. Spring Steel was the first one to try it on, and he made it pay pretty well."

"You think them yells is playin' a decoy, like?" asked Mariposa Marsh.

The ticket-of-leave-man nodded his head, positively.

"I don't. They sound too much in earnest," observed Harold Freeman.

"Jast my idee," chimed in Kentuck, earnestly.

"An' my notion p'ints the same way," added Mariposa Marsh. "It may be that you air correct, old man; you ort to be better posted on matters in this outlandish kentry then we, who air strangers to it. But then thar's a chaintce that you're wrong, an' that some one o' our feller-critters may be out yender in sore need o' the help we kin give him. Ef we sot still here an' do nothin', we'll al'ays be ha'nted by the idee that some pore devil come by his death which we mought 'a' saved him ef we hadn't bin 'tarnal cowards. Now that ain't a pleasant thought fer a feller to kerry 'round with him fer the rest o' his nat'r'l life, an' I fer one ain't goin' to run the risk, when a little scout over yender will settle the matter fer good an' all."

"You sha'n't go alone, Marip sa," cried Frank, and Harold and Mat promptly clinched the declaration of their young leader, while Kentuck seemed no less eager than they.

"It's a foolhardy action," muttered Dempster, discontentedly. "I feel sure you air about to run your heads into a noose; but, these goods were my own to risk, I would bea you company, though I died for it!"

"It's better you stay here," observed Mariposa Marsh, kindly. "Mebbe it's only a trick to draw us all away from the dray, so they kia go through the goods without a fight."

"That's just the point I believe they are trying to play," said Dempster, uneasily. "By drawing us, or a part of us out yonder, they will have matters all their own way. Better give it over, or at least wait until daybreak."

This final appeal from one whom they were fast learning to like and respect, despite the fact of his being a ticket-of-leave man, might have been successful had not the distant cries, which had been lulled for a few moments, been renewed with increased energy.

"We'll run the risk now. Ef it's a trap, a few hours won't make much difference to us, but ef it's as I think, a few minutes may make all the difference than is between life and death to the pore critter out thar," decided Mariposa Marsh.

"Well, good luck go with you! Keep your eyes open, and don't put your second foot down until you are sure your first step is all right. For a sixpence I'd go along with you, and let the dray take care of itself."

"That would be foolish," quietly observed Frank. "If the job is too heavy for us five to handle, one more wouldn't make much difference. Do you keep on the sharp lookout here, under cover, and if those cries for help are only a decoy to lead us astray, and the bushrangers make a raid on the dray, just slip into the brush and fire a couple of shots. We will hear that signal, and be with you as quickly as our legs can carry us, never fear."

Mariposa Marsh, in his impatience to solve the mystery of the distant cries for help, barely waited for young Freeman to cease speaking before he left the road and plunged into the bushes, heading direct for the spot from whence proceeded the alarm, with a certainty born of his long experience in the Western wilds.

He and his followers exhibited far more caution than they would have thought of showing only for the earnest warning of the ticket-of-leave-man. Despite their arguments to the contrary, they were all pretty well convinced that there was danger ahead in the shape of cunning, unscrupulous bushrangers, and though they were firmly resolved to see to the end of the mysterious affair, they were equally determined not to throw away any chance or run any unnecessary risk.

It was very dark in the bush, thanks to the interwoven foliage overhead, but Mariposa Marsh had fixed the proper course in his mind's eye, and could have kept it with his eyes blindfolded. All the others had to do was to keep close to his heels, making as little noise in their passage as possible.

An occasional shout came to their ears in the same voice as at first, but it was evident that the person was either growing fatigued, or was losing heart at such a long period of time elapsing without any sign being vouchsafed to show that his appeals for aid were heard and heeded.

At each repetition of the cry, Mariposa Marsh turned warily toward his companions, evidently fearful that their natural sympathy would get the better of their prudence and lead them to answer with an encouraging shout. But the impression made by the earnest warning of the friendly ticket-of-leave-man had not yet worn away, and not a word was uttered by the boys or Kentuck.

Although the alarm proceeded from a point not more than a mile from the spot where the dray paused for the night, nearly an hour was consumed by Mariposa Marsh in guiding his little army through the tangled bush and gaining a point from whence could be caught the first gleam of a fire beyond. Here he paused long enough to caution the rest against making the faintest sound, bidding them pause while he

reconnoitered the ground, then glided silently away on his self-imposed duty.

The fire had been kindled in a little glade or clearing in the midst of the bush and was so completely surrounded by undergrowth that Mariposa Marsh found no difficulty in keeping himself well covered during his brief scout—for brief it proved to be, since an interruption came from a totally unexpected quarter.

Pausing, he peered stealthily out upon the scene.

The fire had almost exhausted the material of which it had been built, and though it was now flaring up, causing the fitful rays which had first caught the attention of the little band of adventurers, but little more than a heap of embers remained. Enough, however, to reveal a strange scene to the keen eyes of the wondering scout.

Just at the edge of the natural clearing and directly opposite the point where Kentuck and the three boys lay in ambush, stood a covered carriage. There were no signs of the horses which must have been used to draw it thither, but Mariposa did not give them a second thought.

The firelight shone upon a tall, gray-haired man who was leaning against a tree-trunk, and from whose throat had emanated those appealing cries, for at that moment he inflated his lungs and gave utterance to another prolonged shout.

Mariposa Marsh could see that another human being bore the gray-haired man company, but owing to the shadow cast around it, could not determine the sex.

He was on the point of changing his position in order to better scrutinize this second personage, when the interruption hinted at came in the guise of a wild yell of real or pretended alarm in the unmistakable tones of Kentuck, accompanied by a confused, floundering and thrashing around amid the undergrowth.

The instant and perfectly natural impression of Mariposa Marsh was that the trap feared by the ticket-of-leave-man had been sprung upon his comrades, and drawing a revolver he hastened toward the spot, resolved to share their fate; but he was quickly undeceived as he caught the words of Kentuck:

"Gi' me the whisky bottle—quick! I'm snake-bit from top to toe! Good Lawd! I kin feel the pizen a-workin' a'ready—I'm swellin' up tighter'n a drum!"

Though so different from the danger he had anticipated, Mariposa Marsh was but little less alarmed when he distinguished these words. Though claiming to be a personal stranger to Australia, he knew from well-authenticated reports that in no known country could more venomous serpents be found. He feared that Kentuck was doomed to suffer a horrible death of torture, nor was his perplexity lessened by the cries which now came from the little glade.

"Help! for the love of Heaven! whoever you are! We have been 'stuck up' by bushrangers, and our darling daughter carried off by the villains!"

The warning words of Dempster were still ringing in his ears, and the fear of leading his young friends into an ambush ever present in

his mind. Adding this to the natural anxiety inspired by the terror-stricken speech of Kentuck, some faint idea of the quandary in which Mariposa Marsh found himself may be formed.

But Kentuck appeared to forget all else in his panic, and made a break for the smoldering fire in the little glade, beside which he tumbled, frantically sucking away at his long-since emptied whisky-flask.

No attack followed his abrupt appearance, nor did the gray-haired man or his companion stir from their positions against the tree trunk. And then, as this companion cried aloud in the unmistakable voice of a woman, the last lingering doubts of Mariposa Marsh vanished, and breaking cover he hastened to the side of Kentuck, who had dropped the useless flask and was vainly striving to recall some one of the prayers of his childhood, believing death was inevitable.

The boys followed the example set by Mariposa Marsh, and Frank's first action was to cut the stout leather straps—evidently taken from the harness of the horses which had drawn the covered carriage thither—which bound the man and woman back to back against the tree-trunk. The woman would have fallen to the ground when released but for his supporting arms, so benumbed had her limbs become; but, mother-like, she had no thoughts for herself, only for the dear one who had been stolen from her arms.

"My child, my May! Give her, for the love of kin Heaven!"

"We will—we will do all we can to serve you," stammered the lad, not a little relieved when the gray-haired man disengaged him of his hysterical burden.

In the mean time, Mariposa Marsh and the other boys had been busied over Kentuck, who was in an extremely bad way, if his hollow groans and somewhat extravagant exclamations be taken as the criterion. In answer to repeated questions as to where the fatal, poison-laden fangs had buried themselves, he held out his right hand, which Mariposa Marsh inspected closely with growing anger and suspicion, for not the slightest scratch could he discover.

"Ef you've bin playin' bugs onto us, durned ef I don't mop up the hull kentry with your whisky-soaked karkidyle!" he exclaimed, at length. "You hain't bin bit a-tall, nur I don't b'lieve thar was a snake inside a milo o' you!"

"It'd give a snake the jim-jams jist to look at the looks av him!" muttered Mat, *sotto voce*.

" Didn't I putt my han' right onto the pesky, pizen critter? Didn't I feel it sock its teeth clean through an' through my paw? Wouldn't I be a blame fool fer to yell out bloody murder when I wasn't bit? Good Lawd! I kin feel the pizen jest a b'ilin' through an' through me! I kin feel—"

" You kin feel my hoof a-playin' the devil's tattoo 'round your latter eend in jest about ten seconds more, ef you don't dry up that 'tarnal bowlin'!" indignantly interrupted Mariposa Marsh, wholly disgusted.

"Stranger, wasn't I snake-bit?" demanded Kentuck, a preternatural solemnity in his tones and written upon his countenance. "Was I

kickin' up all this darned hullabaloo fer nothin'? Hev I made a double-an'-twisted ejoit o' myself?"

"You hev, fer a scan'alous fact," snorted Mariposa Marsh, disgustedly.

"Then durned ef I don't hunt the hull kentry over ontill I find the p'izenest kind of a p'izen sarpint an' bite myself with it. I ain't goin' to hev all this skeer fer nothin'—I'll git even on it ef it takes all summer—you hear me?"

The ridiculous solemnity with which the man from Kentucky uttered this resolve, more than aught else, tended to appease the anger of Mariposa Marsh, and he heartily joined in the laugh with which the youngsters greeted this speech.

By this time the woman whom Frank had released from durance vile, had in a measure recovered her strength, and both she and the gray-haired man, who proved to be her husband, began telling the story of their misadventure in answer to the questions put them by Mariposa Marsh; but their very anxiety and eagerness to have all understood in a moment, proved an impediment.

To record the questions and answers as uttered, would consume far too much space, when the main facts of the case can be presented so much more concisely.

Henry Brady, the gray-haired man, was a large stock-farmer and landholder in, as well as a magistrate of, a district near that in which the city of Melbourne is situated. Important business called him to the city, and as he expected to be detained for several weeks, his wife and only child, a daughter, named May, bore him company.

At this point Mariposa Marsh evinced a strange degree of agitation, so much so that the magistrate paused, evidently thinking the old man was suddenly taken ill.

"Tain't nothin' when ye git used to it," huskily muttered Mariposa Marsh, with a faint, sickly smile that was more painful to look at than if it had been an undisguised grimace of pain. "They ketch me every onct in a while. Jest wait a bit, an' I'll be all right ag'in."

The three boys interchanged a glance of dobtin' wonder at this assertion. They had known Mariposa Marsh for two years and over, but never before had they witnessed one of these peculiar attacks which he asserted were so common.

"The young leddy was named May, you said," resumed Mariposa Marsh, with poorly-assumed carelessness. "Or did you say she was a little gal?"

"She is a few months under seventeen," responded the judge, wonderingly.

"May, an' most seventeen, and a judge named Brady!" muttered Mariposa Marsh, as if speaking to himself; then added aloud: "Knowed her some time, I reckon?"

"She is our only child, sir," interposed Mrs. Brady.

"Of course—'twas a foolish question, but in sech a case as this, it don't do no harm to fully understand every p'int as we go along," said Mariposa Marsh, hurriedly, but with a repetition of his former sickly smile.

Quickly forgetting the strange behavior of

the old man in his own great anxiety, Mr. Brady resumed his account of the "sticking-up" by bushrangers.

They had taken the road in the covered carriage, drawn by a span of fine horses, and had proceeded thus far on their journey when they were surprised by bushrangers who knocked him, the speaker, senseless before he suspected the presence of danger, then led the horses and carriage by a roundabout trail, far into the bush. Reaching this little natural clearing, they rifled the conveyance of a large sum of money, both gold and notes, which he was intending to deposit in bank, then bound himself and wife to the tree-trunk in the manner already described.

The leader announced his intention of holding the young girl for ransom, promising to restore her safe and sound on the receipt of five thousand pounds in gold coin, or dust, the money to be delivered first, in the manner which he carefully set forth.

"But I am afraid to trust him," added the judge, bitter tears staining his cheeks. "I would willingly pay double the amount asked if I could only feel sure that they would keep faith; but the leader is a treacherous villain, and he will take the ransom and then refuse to release our darling—I am sure of it!"

"I don't see any other way then for you but to set the mounted police on that trail," said Mariposa Marsh, slowly. "We'll help you over to the road, an' it won't be long 'fore you kin git a lift to town—mebbe in the mail-cart. I don't see what else we kin do."

"There were only five men in the gang," eagerly interposed the magistrate. "You can follow them and rescue our child. I will gladly pay you the ransom they demanded. That will be a thousand pounds apiece for you."

"We three are only boys, Mr. Brady," said Frank, with modest eagerness, "but I think I can promise for Mat and Harold, as I do for myself, that we will do all we can toward rescuing your daughter from the bushrangers."

"You can count on me, Frank," said Harold, and Mat as promptly added his assurance, despite the warning shake of Mariposa Marsh's head.

"Rescue her—return our darling child to our arms, alive and unharmed—and I will pay you the money, cheerfully, gladly!" exclaimed the judge.

"The less said on that point the better, sir," said Frank as he flushed hotly. "While we are willing to do what we can for you, we do not sell our blood for money."

"Ruther than hav any quarrel 'bout the money, I'm willin' to take the hull pile my own self, an' let the young gen'lemen 'vide up the glory atween themselvcs," put in Kentuck, with a rare magnanimity.

"We don't b'long to the police, nur we don't know nothin' at all 'bout the law o' the kentry," put in Mariposa Marsh with a dogged sullenness foreign to his usual nature. "You make a gin'erous offer, stranger, but I don't reckon we kin take up your quarrel this time."

"It is our quarrel now, old friend, quite as much as his," said Frank, with a light laugh that did not hide the underlying earnestness in

his tones. "We boys are going to make the attempt, and if you consent to go along with us as chief, I don't think there's much doubt but what we can make the rifle."

"Not a pesky bit o' doubt but what you'll all get rubbed out!" muttered Mariposa Marsh, disgustedly. "But ef you've got your heads set onto it, I s'pose I've got to go 'long." Who did you say was the boss of the gang?" he added, suddenly turning around upon the magistrate, who did not evince his usual readiness in replying.

"He said his name was Spring Steel, but he may have been lying—may have only assumed that name for the purpose of inspiring greater terror."

Even the boys looked a little more serious at the mention of this truly ominous name, but to do them simple justice they were none the less resolved to see the adventure through to the end, even should that necessitate their pitting their lives against that of the notorious bushranger whose bloody life-history they had so recently listened to.

Mariposa Marsh made no comments, but shrewdly let the leaven work, knowing well that were he to press his opposition now, the lads, in their native pride, would only be confirmed the more resolutely in their quixotic determination.

"We'll show you an' the madame back to the trail," he said, quietly. "You couldn't find it for yourselves in the dark, but would most likely git lost in the bush. Come!"

There were no objections raised to this very sensible observation, and in utter silence, so far as speech was concerned, the little party made their way, through the darkness and tangled undergrowth, to where the ticket-of-leave-man was still awake beside his camp-fire.

It turned out to be a most fortunate adventure for him, for Henry Brady was not a man to do anything by halves.

Dempster did not hesitate a moment in doing the magistrate's bidding, but cast off his load and, yoking up his cattle, prepared to take the back trail to Melbourne. And it may be briefly mentioned in this connection, that Judge Brady not only paid for the abandoned goods, but obtained a full pardon for the ticket-of-leave-man, besides giving him a substantial monetary reward for his services.

While Dempster was occupied in making his preparations for the road, Judge Brady again addressed the boys and repeated his offer of the ransom money in case they should succeed in rescuing his daughter May from the bushmen.

"As I said once before, Mr. Brady," responded Frank, firmly but respectfully, "we will do all we can to restore your daughter to your arms, but not for money. We are only boys, and not overly well provided with this world's goods at that, but we are not so poor as to sell ourselves for gold. What we are able to accomplish will be done in the name of common humanity, and not for pay."

Henry Brady was one of those men who have an implicit faith in the power of money to accomplish all things, and at this polite but pointed rebuff, at the hands of a mere lad, he

was not a little taken aback, while the glimmer of hope which he had begun to feel died almost entirely away.

He believed that the mention of the notorious bushranger's name had frightened the boys from their first intention of attempting a rescue—as indeed it would many an older and wiser party—and that they had secretly resolved to run no further risks. On no other grounds could he account for the refusal of his truly magnificent bribe; but he was wise enough not to destroy the faint hope which might possibly remain by expressing his belief in words, and reiterated his thanks before taking his departure in the ox-cart driven by the ticket-of-leaveman.

CHAPTER III.

A QUEER OLD KANGAROO.

"TAIN'T nowways likely we'd hev the chaine to see any fun, even ef we was fools enough fer to set out onto sech a wild-goose chase," observed Mariposa Marsh, with poorly-disguised uneasiness, casting a side glance toward Frank Freeman. "He'll soon run acrost the police, an' they'll set the gal free, while we're lost som'ers in the bush. I reckon it's all fer the best that we cluded not to take a han' in the speculation."

"That cat won't jump, old man," and Frank smiled slightly. "Our word is passed, and it's too late to think of breaking it now. We'd be sorry—more sorry than words can tell—to part with you now, but we are bound to do what we can to get that young lady free from the clutches of those bushrangers."

"Waal, I'd like to know ef that ain't jest what I've bin sayin' all along?" demanded Mariposa Marsh, with an acerbity that amazed his hearers. "I'm bound fer to foller this gal-stealin' feller ef he jumps clean over the moon, but what I'll ketch him an' git that splendiferous female critter away from him! If you fellers is afraid o' the job, why in thunder an' guns don't you come out flat-footed an' say so? I reckon I kin work out the business all alone by myself ef I must!"

"Why, durn my sister's cat's kitten's tail ef I didn't think it was you, all long, as didn't want to chip in!" exclaimed Kentuck, in open-eyed amazement.

"You shot trap, or blamed ef I don't ketch a snake an' make you swaller it alive, head an' all!" sharply retorted Mariposa Marsh. "I bain't paid you out fer that pesky fool trick, yit, but I will unless you hold your hush."

"Well, since we are all agreed to follow up this adventure," said Frank, earnestly, "I move that we elect Mariposa chief, and all pledge our words to obey him to the very letter while we are on the trail."

"I second the motion!" cried Harold Freeman.

"An' I third it!" added Mat, with an earnest sincerity that proved he intended no jest.

"Pervaded I lead ye on the squar'," said Mariposa Marsh with a grin. "Waal, I accept the posish, an' will do the best I kin, though it's a foolish job, to say the least. We run a double risk in bein' strangers in a pesky, outlandish kentry, an' fer that reason I did all I knewed

how fer to choke you'-uns off. But sence your word is passed, an' you're detarnined to kerry the thibg throug, I'm with ye, tooth an' toenail! Mebbe we'll come out top the heap, after all!"

"We're sure to, unless there's more of them than Mr. Brady said," added Frank, speaking with true boyish confidence.

"I could chaw up the lot my own self, topin' off with that Spring Steel hisself!" valorously exclaimed Kentuck, with a truly ferocious grimace.

"We'll let you hev the fu'st whack at 'em then," said Mariposa Marsh, with a malicious grin. "It'd be pizen mean in us to spile your fun by b'ilin' in, so we'll jest stan' by an' look on while you chaw 'em up."

"The ole he-painter from Kentuck kin do it—jest as easy!" affirmed the giant.

"No doubt; but we'll see when the time comes," said Frank, not over well pleased with the boasting of the red-haired man from Kentucky. "What's the first move, Mariposa?"

"I reckon we'd better take a walk over thar to whar we found them critters. It may be that this Spring Steel will hev a spy out to see if anybody comes to set thar game 'oosé, an' ef we kin ketch him, we kin mebbe git some portant news out o' the critter. Even ef that don't happen, we'll be that fur ahead when daylight comes an' we want to take up the trail!"

There was not a dissenting voice, and Mariposa Marsh led his little army back through the bush to where they had set the captives at liberty an hour earlier.

A careful scout around revealed the fact that they were the only human occupants of the vicinity, and after some little discussion it was decided that a watch should be kept throughout the remainder of the night lest some of the bushrangers should put in an appearance, and they thus miss an opportunity of learning something more definite about the outlawed band, if, indeed, their presence was not discovered and their desperate purpose suspected.

The red haired giant from Kentucky volunteered to keep the first watch, declaring that he could not sleep even if he should try, his nerves were so unsettled after his snake-scare.

Though Mariposa Marsh had a suspicion that Kentuck was not quite as courageous as he might have been, he had been given no cause to suspect the fellow's fidelity or honesty, and readily agreed to this proposal. A few minutes later all were soundly sleeping save the sentinel, nor did one of the quartette awaken until after the break of day.

Then Mariposa Marsh awoke and sprung to his feet with an exclamation of annoyance. As he had not been aroused to take his turn on guard, his first and most natural supposition was that Kentuck had fallen asleep on his post; but he was not long in realizing that the truth was even worse than that.

The red-haired giant was nowhere to be seen!

He had clearly deserted the party during the night, while pretending to keep watch; but why had he done so? That was the mystery!

"He hasn't taken anything but what properly belonged to himself, so far as I can see," ob-

served Frank Freeman, soberly. "Surely he could not have been in league with the bushrangers? Yet he came upon us so suddenly and strangely."

"No, he hain't got the sand in his craw fer anythin' like that," said Mariposa Marsh with a sniff of disgust. "He's a cowardly dead-beat—no wuss, I don't reckon. He cluded thar was more kicks then half-pence ahead o' us on this lay-out, an' so he watched his chaintce to levant, to save his own hide."

This was probably the correct solution, and the quartette set about breaking their fast before starting out upon the dangerous trail. But they were fated to see more of Kentuck ere the passing of many days.

Mariposa Marsh was not a man to hang back and make half-work of anything after he had once taken hold of it in earnest, and even Frank, who had dreamp't of the fair young captive while sleeping, and who was thinking of her far more constantly while waking than he would be willing to acknowledge, could find no cause for complaint on the score of activity. Even while his mouth was crammed with the cold, dry food which constituted their breakfast, Mariposa Marsh was busily examining the "sign" in and around the little glade, making a mental note of any peculiarity observed in the various footsteps or aught else that seemed likely to help him in the arduous task of lifting a trail through the bush.

"The old gentleman told a straight story so fur, anyway," he observed, after giving his young allies notice that their work was about to begin. "Thar was only five o' the pesky varmints, an' ef they was all Spring Steel's I reckon we air hefty enough to give a good a'count o' them ef we kin only manidge to ketch the fu'st sight."

"They took the horses along," observed Frank Freeman, with a keen glance at the trail. "That will increase the difficulty of overtaking them."

"No, lad; you've got the thing tail-eend fo'-most," returned Mariposa Marsh, with a low chuckle as he passed along the clearly-defined trail. "Them bosses bein' in comp'ny makes me feel surer o' success, fer two reasons. Fu'st, they makes the trail so much plainer that we kin foll'r it without any trouble; an' secondly, a two-legged man kin make his way through the bush an' over this broken kentry a heap faster than any fo'legged bosses kin."

"But let them take to the high-road or the main trail—"

"Which they ain't fools enough to do," interrupted the old trailer, positively. "Them bosses would betray them, an' so would the gal. No, they'll keep to the bush an' make straight fer the randyvoo whar they ginerally hangs out, to wait fer the old man to come to time with his ransom money. All we've got to take keer of is to see that we don't run into 'em, onawares, sence that moughtent be healthy fer gentlemen about our size."

The youngsters, though self-reliant beyond their age, were not over-wise in their own estimation, and readily yielded to the greater experience in such matters of Mariposa Marsh.

A casual observer would little have suspected

upon what a stern errand the party of adventurers were bound. Though not exactly careless, their demeanor was more like that of persons on a pleasure-trip, or at most, out for a day's sport with the gun among the more harmless denizens of the wild wood, rather than upon a trail which was fated to end in bloodshed and death.

The boys were eagerly observant of the many curious things which they both saw and heard.

Until now they had had little chance of satisfying their curiosity, which had been aroused by the many strange tales which they had heard concerning this land of contradictions; where Christmas came in midsummer, and the Fourth of July was often celebrated by a blinding snow-storm; where the leaves of the trees turn perpendicularly and cast no shadow when the sun is at its meridian; where the wild fruits are unfit to eat—the pears being hard as though carved from wood; the raspberry woolly and insipid; while the cherry bears its stone on the outside—the land of anomalies, where all their cherished remembrances were upset and everything seemed to be turned "wrong end foremost."

They heard the merry and metal-like "ting-a-ling" of the remarkable "bell-bird," and then the strange, discordant chorus of the "laughing-jackass," but Mariposa Marsh would not allow them to leave the trail in order to the more closely inspect those feathered curiosities.

They caught an occasional glimpse of an opossum—the highly-esteemed "pig face" of the Australian blacks—and once sighted a brace of wandering "dingoes" or wild dogs, which at first they mistook for wolves; but their excitement ran highest when they caught their first fleeting glimpse of a huge kangaroo as it overleaped a fallen tree like a long-tailed, four-legged meteor clad in rusty brown hair.

Even Mariposa Marsh caught the infection, though his interest found birth in his stomach, which now forcibly reminded him that the usual dinner hour was close at hand, and called loudly for a steak of roasted kangaroo.

That was the one great foible of the veteran. He had an appetite that would have bred a famine in any ordinary boarding-house, but as he truthfully said, whenever jested with on this tender point, "he lived by eating." More than once this weakness had been the means of getting him into trouble, but never into a more serious scrape than it was fated to on this occasion.

The boys, by which is meant just now the brothers Frank and Harold Freeman, though Mat Marley was by no means a novice with either rifle or revolver, had tested their skill as marksmen upon nearly all the different species of game which their native land could afford, and, boy like, were regretting that the existing circumstances would not allow them to improve the present opportunity of adding a kangaroo to their list of victories, when the stomach of Mariposa Marsh overruled his head, and he uttered the most welcome words:

"We don't pear to hav gained much on the p'izen gal-stealers, an' I reckon they're so fur

ahead that the sound o' burnin' powder wouldn't reach 'em, through this thick bresh an' timmer, 'less it was set off in a cannon, which we don't kerry. So keep your eyes peeled, boys, an' ef you git a good chainte at another o' them he-old kangaroosters, jast send him a perlite invite to stop to dinner with us! They do say them on-gainly critters cain't be beat fer good, solid eatin'!"

Nothing further was needed to put the lads on the *qui vive*, and with rifles in readiness for instant use whenever the occasion should arise, their eyes roving with eager restlessness in every direction, they followed the lead of Mariposa Marsh. But for some time it appeared as though this permission had been granted too late to do any good.

In fact, the kangaroos had almost entirely deserted that section of country, frightened away by the influx of gold-diggers, who were in no-wise sparing of their powder and lead, though not many of their bullets appeared to have a "billet," despite the well-worn adage. It was rarely that one of the once numerous animals was encountered so near the settlements or along the line of travel, and Mariposa Marsh ran little chance of feasting upon kangaroo steak on that day, at least.

Yet within an hour from the time that Mariposa Marsh gave the boys permission to use their firearms, a shot was fired, and the game sharply hit, too, though only by a snap-shot.

Harold Freeman caught a momentary glimpse of a dark figure gliding through the undergrowth, and so did Mariposa Marsh at nearly the same instant. The old man heard the sharp click of the lad's rifle coming to full cock, and turned toward him with a warning cry, but too late to arrest the shot. The figure had vanished amid the bushes before Harold could raise his rifle and cover it; but he was a true snap-shot, with whom instinct often serves instead of eyesight, and the pellet of lead which he sent where he knew the game had *ought* to be, found its target. A long-legged body plunged through the bush, and lay for a moment in full view, kicking vigorously, and uttering an angry howl of pain in a voice unmistakably human!

Instead of a kangaroo, Harold had brought down one of the native black fellows!

CHAPTER IV.

MARIPOSA MARSH MEANS BUSINESS.

"Now you *hev* played thunder!" cried Mariposa Marsh, almost as soon as the unlucky shot was discharged. "Take to kiver an' look out fer two-legged snakes!"

It needed not this warning to convince the three boys that their lives were in danger, for at that moment the forest before and to either hand of them appeared to vomit forth legions of nearly naked black demons who, with shrill yells of rage and fury, cast their pointed and fire-hardened spears in a hissing cloud toward them.

Fortunately for the lads, the natives were taken quite as much by surprise as they were themselves, and though their intentions were undoubtedly, the spears were cast without much attempt at taking aim, only one taking effect, that causing Harold to jump as though a red-

hot iron had been suddenly clapped against the side of his face. The wound was slight—indeed the skin upon his cheek had hardly been broken as the pointed missile hissed by—but it was enough to open the eyes of the youngsters to what, in all human probability, lay before them ere they should see the last of this truly unfortunate misadventure.

They instantly followed the example set them by Mariposa Marsh, and crouched down behind a fallen tree, almost overgrown with vines and bushes, which lay close at hand, cocking their fire-arms in readiness to repel the assault which they believed would not long be delayed, if not instantaneous. But the natives of Australia, like the red-men of America, do not fight after the fashion of the pale-faces, nor often come to a hand-to-hand encounter.

"No sech luck as that!" muttered Mariposa Marsh with a grim frown as he noticed and correctly interpreted the action of his youthful comrades. "Ef they would only make a bold rush like decent two-legged critters, so we could knock over a dozen or two, the rest would mighty soon 'clude we was 'bad medicine,' an' wouldn't be long in 'memberin' that they had mighty important business some'r else jest about this time o' day. But they won't do it. They jest sneak aroun' an' sneak aroun' ontel they git a good chainte to stick us chuck-full o' thar p'intaed ramrods, 'bout givin' us a bit o' chainte fer our white alley—the durned fool niggers!"

"Unless we can beat them off before night-fall," said Frank, seriously, "I'm afraid we stand a very faint show of getting out of this scrape with whole skins."

"No more then does a fat louse when a Diger Injun shets down his teeth onto it," growled Mariposa Marsh with more force than elegance of illustration.

"I could kick myself for being such an idiot—to mistake a nigger for a kangaroo!" muttered Harold in a tone of utter disgust. "I'm always and forever getting other people into scrapes. Only for my folly, nothing of this would have occurred!"

"Now you don't want to begin makin' sech talk as that," said the veteran with a rough kindness peculiarly his own, "'ca'se I won't stan' it, nohow! That shot was the luckiest thing that could 'a' happened fer our side, an' I'll tell ye why, ef them pi'zen imps out yender 'll keep still long enough. The fuss was boun' to come, sooner or later. Them varmintz hev bin follerin' of us fer hours, I don't make no doubt, jest waitin' fer a good chainte to rope us in. When they once ketched us in the right place, they'd 'a' jumped us, an' we wouldn't 'a' known what it was that hurt us, we'd 'a' bin stuck so full o' spears. But you tuck 'em ona-war's, like, an' jest knocked thar plans west-end-an'-crooked—don't ye see? So we owe you our lives, 'stead o' t'otherwise."

Harold looked a little dubious at this mode of viewing the case, but not for long. He was constitutionally averse to looking at the dark side of anything, and knowing that his intentions had been good, whatever the consequences, he soon forgot his regrets in the exciting scenes which followed.

A wooden spear whistled through the dense foliage close above their heads, followed by another and another, until they were forced to crouch low down behind the tree-trunk in order to avoid being spitted.

Mariposa Marsh was intensely disgusted at thus being made a silent target of, and when the spears began to come from the same side on which they were stationed, telling them plainer than words that they were completely surrounded by the enemy, his impatience found vent in both actions and words.

"This is too durned much sugar fer a cent!" he growled, gathering his long legs up under him. "I'm goin' to crawl out to the butt o' the tree, yender, an' see ef I Cain't salivate one o' them pizen imps. They'll be closin' in on us purty soon, an' then it'll be all night with the 'hull caboodle o' us! Lay low an' keep close kivered!"

Without waiting to listen to any objection to his incurring more than his own share of the risk, from the lads, Mariposa Marsh hastily wound a leafy vine around his head and shoulders, then crept without making the slightest rustle among the dense foliage, along to the butt of the huge log where he paused and slowly raised his head above the barrier for the purpose of taking an observation.

As fate would have it, one of the black fellows had taken precisely the same resolution, and had gained the cover of the fallen tree at a point directly opposite Mariposa Marsh.

The native made this discovery a single second the earliest, and with a cry of mingled alarm and astonishment at the unexpected apparition which arose before him, made a swift thrust at the vine-covered head with his sharp-pointed spear.

Mariposa Marsh also yelled, quite as much taken aback as the native, but bobbed down his head in time to save his life, though the spear raised a little furrow through his hair and scalp—enough to madden the veteran and render him utterly reckless. With a grating curse, he thrust forward the muzzle of his rifle, striking the black full in the face, and as the trigger was pulled at the same time, the weapon exploded, fairly blowing the head of the astounded wretch to atoms!

"Hyar goes fer your meat-houses, ye dirty whoelps!" yelled Mariposa, leaping over the tree-trunk.

The wary veteran seemed all at once transformed into a raging desperado, thirsting for blood, and his sudden onset was quite as much a surprise to the three boys as it could possibly be to their dusky enemies.

That glancing spear-wound had aroused a dangerous devil in the veteran, and overleaping the fallen tree, wholly forgetful of the prudence he had so carefully enjoined upon his young comrades, a revolver drawn and cocked in each hand, he dared the vengeance of the skulking blacks, loading them with the most opprobrious epithets his vivid imagination could devise or his nimble tongue enunciate. He was too angry to think of taking any precautions, and for the time he was but little better than a maniac, glaring around him in search of another victim.

This utter recklessness proved to be the best

safeguard he could have invented. Whether the natives deemed him insane or attacked by a sudden madness, can only be surmised, but certain it is that they were thrown into confusion by the wholly unexpected onset, and that the few spears which the more daring cast, flew wide of their mark, and that at a short range where the poorest marksman of all could have repeatedly planted the missiles within the breadth of a man's palm.

Mariposa Marsh no more minded the whistling of the wooden spears than if they had been so many mosquitoes. There was "blood in his eye," and wherever he caught a glimpse of a black fellow, there his pistols were turned, and one or more bullets sent with an aim as sure as it was swift. Not content with this, the infuriated old man charged upon the enemy as recklessly as though he bore a charmed life and could come to no hurt. This would, almost assuredly have lost him the advantage he had already gained, if indeed it had not cost him his life, only for the prompt support afforded by the three boys.

They quickly recovered from their surprise, and believing the peril of their veteran leader much greater than it was in reality, they paused only long enough to empty their rifles at the glancing figures uncovered by Mariposa Marsh's reckless assault, then drew their revolvers and hastened to his assistance with loud shouts of encouragement.

The death of several of their number, added to the storm of leaden hail which came from the weapons of the pale-faces, proved too much for the stomachs of the surviving blacks, who at once took to flight and vanished as suddenly as though the earth had opened beneath their feet and swallowed them up.

Even more than the red-men, these blacks depend upon surprise and strategy, having but a poor stomach for downright blows when openly confronted by a foeman.

In this case it was Mariposa Marsh who required the curb, rather than the hot-blooded boys, and when he was recalled to his usual good sense and judgment by the hasty warning which Frank cast after him, the veteran paused in his headlong chase with a deep flush tinging his weather-beaten face and a somewhat sheepish look filling his eyes.

The opportunity was far too good to let slip, and Frank began a lecture upon the folly of letting one's hot blood over-ride one's prudence so utterly. Mariposa Marsh easily recognized this as one of his own sermons, reconstructed for the occasion, and though he interrupted the speaker, it was not done in anger.

"I ain't goin' to deny that I deserve it all, an' more on top o' that," he said, with a short laugh, "The old Adam got into me, I reckon, when that pizen critter stuck his p'inted wooden ramrod through my topknob. I thought I was done fer, an' it 'peared like I must make the black rascals pay big fer my skelp. I know I thought that much, but what folldered was like a p'izen nightmar' ontel your yellin' woke me up."

"It was the shortest way out of a nasty scrape, and as we came out of it right end up, I suppose it was all for the best. But it will be

many a day before I forgot the scare you gave me. Why, man! I could almost have sworn I saw a dozen spears pass clean through your body!" added Frank, soberly.

"I don't feel much like a two-legged riddle, but I was so owdacious mad all over that I couldn't stop to see whether I was killed or not," replied Mariposa Marsh, passing his hands over his limbs and body as though in search of a fatal wound. "No, I don't reckon I'll pass in my checks jest yet. I Cain't see as I was hit only the once—which was once too many, fer it smarts like blazes!"

"You don't think there was any danger of those spears having been poisoned, do you?" asked Harold, turning a shade paler. "I didn't like to speak about such a trifling scratch, but my cheek feels as though it was burning up!"

Even Mariposa Marsh grew sober, and though he affected to laugh, it was but a sickly attempt at merriment.

CHAPTER V.

A BREAK IN THE TRAIL.

"TWON'T do no harm to be on the safe side," he said, a moment later. "Them dirty imps ain't none too good fer sech or'ney tricks. We'll git back to kiver an' try a little o' this salve which Charley Cooper give me fer snake-bites."

The little party were all sober enough now, as well they might be, in the face of a danger more terrible far than the one from which they had so recently escaped.

Taking cover to guard against the possibility of a renewal of the attack by the demoralized blacks, Mariposa Marsh produced the little box of precious salve which a friendly officer of the mounted police had pressed upon him as a sure antidote for the poison of snake-bites, and thoroughly anointed the scratch upon Harold's cheek, after which he submitted to the same operation on himself. Whether it was that the antidote was all-powerful, or that the spear-points had not been poisoned, certain it is that neither of the wounded adventurers ever suffered any ill effects from their injuries in the days to come, save that Mariposa Marsh had to be a little careful in scratching his head for a week or two!

While this anointing process was going on, nothing was seen or heard of the natives, though Mat Marley kept a keen lookout, and a few minutes later Mariposa Marsh once more led the way along the trail of the bushrangers.

The youngsters needed no instructions to keep a close and wary lookout, nor did they yearn so eagerly for a shot at a stray kangaroo as they had a short time before. The lesson was one which they would not be apt to soon forget.

Several hours passed by, and Mariposa Marsh still picked up the trail without any especial difficulty, though the nature of the ground was changing and becoming more sterile and rocky. The trail was now winding along the side of quite an extensive range of hills, where, in more places than one, the keen and experienced eyes of the old gold-hunter detected fair prospects of valuable quartz-mines. This told him that all of the gold-bearing lands had not yet been

taken up by any means, but he said nothing of his discoveries for several reasons.

The quartz could not be profitably worked without a regular mill, provided with costly machinery and stamps, and though there might possibly be found old placer-diggings in the vicinity by searching for them, they had not even a pan in which to wash out the "pay dirt." Besides, they were bound on other business now, and he believed in finishing up one job before beginning upon another.

Once or twice he lost all traces of the trail, but by using "head-work," he as often regained it by casting ahead, and thus lost but little time.

The afternoon was pretty well spent when the trail they were following left the hills and struck across a level tract of ground that was extremely fertile, and bore indisputable traces of having been recently used as a pasture range for both sheep and cattle. Before long they were convinced that, though no stocks were within sight, the range was still occupied, and Mariposa's stomach, now very hollow, began to trouble him again.

"Ef we kin only find whar the shepherd lives what 'tends to this run, I reckon we kin git somethin' fit fer white men to eat. 'Pears like I've got a cat an' all her kittens a-chasin' a monstrous lively rat 'round about in my stom-jacket, from the way it feels."

Still Mariposa Marsh did not cease his trail-ing until at a point where a large flock of sheep had passed over the ground since the bush-rangers, completely obliterating the sign and putting an end to their labors, for the time being, at least.

"We couldn't do much more than kiver the broken trail ag'in afore dark, even if we could do that much," he said, straightening up and brushing the drops of sweat from his heated brow. "We've done enough fer one day, anyhow, an' I move we try to find whar this shepherd hangs out, an' git him to sell us a sheep or two fer grub."

Eager though the boys were, one and all, to find and rescue May Brady from her ruffianly captors, they uttered not a word of dissent to this suggestion. They were not "foot-seasoned" after their long stay aboard ship, and were pretty thoroughly jaded by the toil they had undergone during the last few days beneath a broiling sun. Under these circumstances the proposed halt and feast were quite as welcome to them as to Mariposa Marsh, and they gladly proceeded in quest of the shepherd's hut.

This proved to be not far distant, and was soon after discovered, though their cheery hail remained unanswered and the rude edifice was clearly untenanted. But this as they could readily see, was only for the time being, for a small fire was smoldering before the open door, and there were several ragged, dirty blankets lying upon the low pallet which was plainly occupied at night as a bed by the stock-keeper.

With true boyish curiosity the lads examined the hut, as it was the first one of the kind they had met with, but Mariposa Marsh was far differently and less pleasantly occupied.

He had recovered the lost trail, and knew that the bushrangers had departed from that very

spot less than ten hours previously, after having spent the latter portion of the night there. The boys could scarcely believe this assertion, but the veteran was positive.

"The p'izen imps ett one meal here, an' mebbe two. Anyways thar lays the fresh bones o'two different sized sheep. The hosses was hitched to them bushes, an' by the droppin's they left behind them, as well as thar buff-marks, I know they didn't leave this spot ontel the sun was a good ways up. I kin show ye whar each one o' the five p'izen imps rested, an' I kin tell ye that only three o' the lot smoked tobacco, while the hull kit-an'-boodle chawed."

While speaking, Mariposa Marsh was as good as his word, pointing out each fact as he made allusion to them.

"I reckon this poile yer makes out foor av the lot smokers!" grinned Mat Marley, indicating a little pile of ashes beside a smooth-worn spot of ground close beside the fire. "An' that makes six in the gang, 'stead av ownly foive!"

"You've got a fa'r eye, youngster," said Mariposa Marsh, with an approving nod. "Tain't many boys would a' noticed that; but then you jump at the wrong 'clusion. The man that smoked out them ashes an' polished that bit o' ground with the seat o' his britches is the one that's goin' to provide us all with supper!"

"You mean the stock-man?" exclaimed Frank Freeman.

"Zactly. But b'ar one p'int in mind: you must let me do all the talkin', an' you must be keerful to back me up in all I say, or we may git into a p'izen scrape."

"You think that he is in league with the bushrangers?"

"It looks peskily that way, seein' how fri'ndly they colluged together; but I may be mistook. A man that lives so much exposed an' alone as these stock-keepers air bleeged to do, cain't a'ford to kick up a row or stan' on thar dignity every time a bushranger comes aroun', an' this feller may be the clean stuff, after all, though I much misdoubt it. Tobacco is too skeerce a article in these lonely parts fer enemies to smoke often together, an' I reckon we'll find this shepherd a black bird, which is why you must keep a padlock onto your tongues—understan'?"

"There's somebody watching us!" suddenly said Harold, in a cautious tone. "I just caught a glimpse of him in the bush over yonder!"

"Take it cool, but move so you kin jump inside the shanty or onder good kiver at a moment's notice," muttered Mariposa Marsh, betraying no outward signs of uneasiness nor even casting a glance in the direction slyly indicated by the lad. "I don't reckon it's anybody but the shepherd, but it'll do no harm to keep on the safe side."

With admirably counterfeited carelessness, the boys obeyed; and when satisfied that they could instantly reach cover in case of necessity, Mariposa Marsh turned abruptly around and faced the point where the skulker was hidden, clapping one hand to his mouth and uttering a shrill, long-drawn *coo-ee!*

His keen eye could detect a faint rustling among the bushes where the fellow was concealed, but there was no response to his call nor any other indication that the stranger intended to discover himself.

Mariposa Marsh was not in the humor for wasting any more time, and throwing forward the muzzle of his rifle, he called out in a clear, sharp tone:

"Ef you're a white man come out an' show your face, but ef you're a four-legged kangaroo-ster, stay whar you be four seconds longer, an' I'll send a four ounce bullet in thar to ax ye to stop fer supper!"

No man in his sober senses could have doubted the earnestness with which this warning was delivered, and the shepherd evidently considered he would be running less risks as a man in the open, than as a kangaroo in the bush, for he promptly emerged from his covert, though there was strong suspicion written upon his sullen, hang dog countenance as he slowly advanced toward the hut.

A single glance at the fellow's face went far to confirm the suspicions which Mariposa Marsh had already formed, founded on the sign to be read around the camp fire.

Villain and unscrupulous rascal was indelibly written upon the stranger's face—a countenance that would have convicted the fellow before almost any unprejudiced jury of honest men.

Mariposa Marsh had already formed his plan of procedure, and lost no time in carrying it out.

"You run a p'izen resk, stranger, in actin' so like a wild kangarooster afore a party which is so mighty nigh starved as we air," he said, with a cheery laugh, extending his hand, which was gingerly accepted by the shepherd, then immediately dropped. "Ef you've got a sheep or two to spar', you kin ax your own price an' we won't grumble, jest so the critter is big enough to make us a squar' meal."

"You can have all you want, by paying for it," said the fellow, the avaricious light which filled his eyes showing how plainly Mariposa Marsh had estimated his weak spot.

"I'll go help you git it," said the veteran, who was in nowise inclined to lose sight of the fellow until he should have sounded him thoroughly. "I hain't hed a good, squar' meal sense we left Melbourne, a week ago. Like durned fools, we left the main trail to hunt after a kangarooster, an' of course got lost in the bush. Mought a' knowed we would, in sech a p'izen kentry, whar everythin' goes by contrairies!"

"You're bound for the diggings, then?" asked the shepherd, as they entered a small inclosure where were several fat sheep, while the blood-stains around plainly proved that from thence had been drawn the provisions consumed by the bushrangers.

Mariposa Marsh responded, making up his story as he went along, while the stock-man butchered and dressed the animal selected and paid for.

This work was quickly and deftly done, but Mariposa Marsh felt that his self-imposed task was none the less so, for by the time they re-

turned to the hut, the last suspicion entertained by the shepherd seemed wholly appeased.

But little breath was consumed in speech while the party were appeasing their appetites. The brain of Mariposa Marsh, however, was very busy, and he weighed every point of the situation carefully in his mind before deciding upon the course he should pursue.

"I reckon the bushrangers make a pretty good thing out o' you, livin' so fur as you do from any sort o' help," he observed, filling and lighting his pipe, when he could eat no more. "Come down on you fer fresh meat pretty often, don't they, eh?"

"Not now," slowly responded the shepherd, with a keen but covert glance at the stolid face of the veteran from beneath his shaggy eyebrows. "They did trouble me some, before the gold discoveries gave them a more profitable field to work, but it has been more than a year since they paid me a visit."

This assertive Mariposa Marsh knew to be a deliberate lie, and be no longer felt any doubts about the fellow's being a friend if not a secret ally of Spring Steel."

"I didn't know," he added quietly. "We crossed a trail back yender, some miles, which we kinder reckoned was made by bushrangers. They hed a young gal along with them, an' she was kept tied up, which made it look all the more 'spicious. Seein' they was passin' so nigh, I didn't know but what they mought 'a' called here fer to git a fresh stock o' grub. But o' course they didn't, or you'd 'a' seed 'em."

The rascal was plainly growing more and more uneasy with each sentence, and shifted on his seat as though he found it growing uncomfortably warm, but he met the keen gaze of Mariposa Marsh without flinching as that worthy ceased speaking.

"They were travelers like yourselves, most likely, and like you, lost in the bush. At any rate, they did not stop here, nor did I see anything of them," he said, doggedly.

"Waal," cried Mariposa Marsh with sudden heat. "I like a liar, but you suit me too durned well! They *did* stop here, an' you *did* see 'em—hold hard, my covey! Stir a inch from that seat or raise a finger, an'll blow you to kingdom come in a holy minnit!"

CHAPTER VI.

IN WHICH OUR FRIENDS SEE HOT WORK.

MARIPOSA MARSH emphasized this threat by thrusting a cocked revolver full in the face of the shepherd as that worthy made a sudden movement, whether to leap upon the man who bearded him so boldly, or to attempt an escape, can only be surmised.

"Drap that knife o' yours, an' b'ar this one thing in mind onless you're tired o' livin' an' want to commit susanside," added the veteran in a quiet, even tone that carried conviction with it. "T' e fu'st crooked step you t' k'e'll lead you straight to death! I'd jest as quick blow your brains out as to putt my heel onto the head of a p'izen sarpint that was tryin' to bite me from the grass."

"What have I done to deserve such treatment at your hands?" sullenly demanded the shepherd, an ugly devil in his eyes, despite the

promptness with which he obeyed the stern command to lay down his long, sharp clasp-knife.

"It's as much what you hain't done as what you hev," responded Mariposa Marsh in a tantalizing manner, in no particular hurry, now that the game seemed to lay in his own hands. "Ef you'd 'a' come out flat-footed an' showed the colors of a honest man, as you should 'a' done, thar would 'a' bin gold in your pocket 'stead of a pistol-muzzle in your face. But you wouldn't hev it that way. You throwed off the chainece that was giv' you, an' now you must putt up with the other thing."

"Is this old fellow crazy?" demanded the shepherd, turning his face toward Frank Freeman, who sat nearest him on the other side. "If he is, which I begin to believe, why don't you put a collar 'round his neck and label him dangerous?"

Despite the natural anxiety which they felt as to the ultimate result of this strange scene, neither Frank nor his younger mates could refrain from laughing at the expression of intense disgust which came over the weather-beaten countenance of Mariposa Marsh as he listened to this insolent speech from the lips of the ragged fellow whom he had believed so thoroughly cowed. But then his natural sense of humor overcame his rage, and he freely joined in the laugh.

"Thar's more in you then I give you credit fer," he said with a grin; "but I reckon you'll need it all afore you git out o' this scrape. Pay 'tention, now! I mean business chuck up from the word go! When did you see Spring Steel and his gang o' cut-throats the last time?"

"I don't know who you mean. I never heard the name before," was the cool reply.

"Lie number one an' two. Mark 'em down, Frank. The critter'll hev to pay fer 'em all afore I git through with him," said Mariposa Marsh, impressively.

"If we were only alone man to man!" snarled the convict.

"But we ain't," was the provoking retort. "That makes me think, though. I reckon we'll be safer inside the shanty, as it is growin' dusky. Some o' your p'izen bushrangin' fri'nds mought chainece along, an' we ain't quite ready fer 'em yit. Git up an' go inside. No tricks, nuther. Your legs is long enough to kerry your karkidge pritty fast, but I reckon a bullet kin chaw up space still faster!"

The shepherd made no answer to this gentle hint, but arose and entered the rude building without giving his captors any trouble. Mariposa Marsh saw that the fellow was above the general run of stock-men, a class composed for the greater part, in Australia, of ticket-of-leave-men, at least during the gold excitement. This was almost a matter of course, since all those who were at liberty to act as their fancy dictated, naturally left their herding to try their luck at the diggings. The large majority of shepherds were not only convicts, but of the lowest, most ignorant type, who were fitted for nothing more elevated in the scale of employment, through lack of education. But there were exceptions, and Mariposa Marsh knew that he had found one now.

His command of language was fair, and he never seemed at a loss for a word, while the manner in which he enunciated them, was proof positive that he had received a good education.

After the first few moments of surprise and uncertainty consequent upon the unexpected unmasking of his visitors' real purpose, the fellow showed such cool nerve in the face of overwhelming odds, that Mariposa Marsh began to scent danger.

Despite the positive denial of the shepherd, he felt sure that he held some secret connection with the bushrangers, under command of Spring Steel, and suspected the rascal's courage was partly due to the fact that these or other outlaws were expected to pay him another visit ere long, perhaps to obtain fresh provisions.

This suspicion was what made the veteran change his base so abruptly and leave the cool, pure air of evening for the by no means sweet-scented interior of the hut. Better suffer a little inconvenience on that score than to run the risk of being shot down from ambush by an unscrupulous enemy in answer to a secret signal given by the hang-dog looking shepherd.

"Twon't do no harm fer you boys to kinder keep a lookout down that-a-way," said Mariposa Marsh, nodding toward the open door.

"Don't go out o' easy reach o' the shanty. I kin feel it in my bones that thar's p'izen snakes creepin' 'round."

The lads themselves were far from feeling at ease, and they began to fear that Mariposa Marsh had acted too hastily in his dealings with the shepherd. Granted that he was an ally of the notorious bushranger, and could tell all about them should he feel so inclined, he would not be likely to quickly forget or forgive the treatment he had received, and would be pretty apt to embrace the first opportunity to work them evil.

"Twould have been far better had we kept on without stopping, even at the cost of losing a good hot supper," muttered Frank, as soon as he was clear of the hut.

But the two younger lads had more faith in the resources of Mariposa Marsh, and declared that matters would come out all right in the end, somehow.

Mariposa Marsh signed his prisoner to a seat near the further end of the room, then placed himself in a position from whence he could command the approach to the door, as well as the shepherd, settling himself down comfortably with philosophical coolness.

"Now, you p'izen critter, I'm goin' to talk to you like a Dutch uncle, an' mind ye, too, I mean business, every time! Lyin' won't do ye no good. I know too much o' the story a'ready, an' nothin' 'cept the plain, solid truth kin git ye out o' this."

He paused as if expecting a reply, but if so, he was disappointed. The shepherd sat in stolid silence, and the veteran once more took up the thread of his discourse.

"Your beautiful mug shows plain enough that you never paid your own passage over the briny, an' I judge you air actin' as shepherd here under a ticket-o'-leave. Ef I'm right in this guess, you know even better than I do that it wouldn't take many words—say to police

captain Charley Cooper, or, better still, to Henry Brady, the magistrate—to hev your pass canceled an' you sent back to hard labor on the chain."

"You have no proof—you could only accomplish that by black lying against me!" sullenly said the convict, but shifting uneasily on his seat, and Mariposa Marsh knew that his cunningly-aimed shot had hit its mark.

"You're yelpin' on the wrong trail, now, my covey. Thar's proof enough not to need becki' it up with the ghost of a lie. Ef you don't believle it, jest you listen:

"The bushranger knowned as Spring Steel, together with four others o' the same stripe, yesterday made a raid on Judge Henry Brady, wife an' child, who was bound fer the city o' Melbourne in a kivered kerridge, drawed by two horses. They tied him up to a tree, together with his wife, but kerried off his daughter, sayin' they would hold her pris'ner ontel the judge paid them five thousan' pounds in gold, as ransom money. They tuck the two bosses an' the gal, an' stopped here last night. You killed two sheep fer 'em to eat, an' then sot an' smoked out two or three pipes o'tobacco by the fire yender, while they told you all they hed done an' all they 'tended to do. The gal-pris'ner was kep' in the shanty, here, but you men-critters slep' outside. In the mornin' you cooked the p'izen imps some more grub, an' then they left.

"Now then, thar's my evidence; how do you like it?"

The shepherd had been strongly impressed by the words of his accuser, and stared at him as one might at a wondrous magician, while point by point he stated as facts, what his keen eye and shrewd wits had read in the "sign" scattered about the premises. Naturally enough he gave Mariposa Marsh credit for more than was justly his due, but he was not wholly conquered yet, and fell back upon his last defense.

"I live here alone, miles from any hope of assistance. I might be murdered and my body rot for months before my fate was discovered. What could I do when they threatened my life, but obey them? I would have been butchered by a wild dog!"

"I knew that they were bushrangers, and that they had been up to some sort of mischief, for they acted as though they anticipated pursuit, though not immediately; and they warned me to keep a still tongue in my head as I valued my life. They swore they would come back and murder me without mercy, if I ever hinted at having seen them pass this way. I may be only a convict, but my life is as dear to me as yours is to you."

"Then you're a bigger fool then I tuck ye to be!" uttered Mariposa Marsh, sharply, "or you'd make your tongue travel a straighter trail. You Cain't pull the wool over my eyes so easy. You are good friends with this Spring Steel, even ef you ain't workin' in caboots with him, which I'm ready to bet big odds you be! You know whar he is gone, too, an' you've got to tell us right whar he is, or you'll never live to see the sun rise ag'in! That's said an' swore to—you onderstan'?"

The fellow did understand, and clearly be-

lieved that Mariposa Marsh would be as good as his word in case he was driven to extremities, for he weakened suddenly:

" You needn't be so hard on a poor devil who is down on his luck," he said sullenly. " It will be as much as my life is worth to tell on them, if you let a single man of the gang escape you. But if I do tell, what are you willing to give me?"

" If you give us clear directions how an' whar to find the pizen imps, we'll jest tie you hand an' foot an' shet you up in the shanty ontel we kin come back to set ye free or punish ye, jest as the information you give may deserve."

" You might as well kill me now, and save all that trouble!" retorted the shepherd, with an angry sneer. " You might get lost, or Spring Steel may prove too much for you, as he often has for better men. I will make no such terms as those!"

" I'd be a bigger fool to let you go loose, to run around us an' tell the pizen imps we're comin'," grinned Mariposa.

" Then there is only one way: I must act as your guide to the rendezvous," slowly added the convict.

" That sounds more like it! We'll make a night walk of it," said Mariposa Marsh, pretending not to notice the quick, exultant light which momentarily filled the fellow's eyes. " The pizen critters won't be expectin' to see us so soon, nur yit in the dark. But afore we start, you kin set to work an' cook up the rest o' that mutton. I ain't partial to settin' out on a campaign with empty lockers."

" Shall I freshen up the fire outside, or cook the meat in here?" asked the shepherd in an almost cheerful tone of voice as he pointed to the rude fireplace with which the hut had been furnished for use during the cold or rainy season.

" In here. The light will be better hid," decided Mariposa.

The sun had set, and the short Australian twilight was upon them. The shadows were rapidly deepening, and within a very few minutes the night would fairly be upon them.

Mariposa Marsh felt pretty well convinced that, though the stock-keeper was meditating treachery, there was no immediate danger. If the fellow had expected another visit from the bushrangers that evening, his manner of acting would have been far different. He would have temporized, have played for time with a more conciliating demeanor, striving to detain the party until the bushmen could put in an appearance.

Reasoning thus, the veteran called in his young companions; a summons which they were in no wise loth to obey, for the usual cold night dews were falling heavily. At that season of the year, while the days were extremely hot, the nights were almost invariably cold, ice sometimes forming in considerable thickness, and that night bade fair to be unusually cold.

The boys gladly sought the shelter of the hut, and silently watched the convict as he roasted and fried portions of the meat over the crackling fire. A stranger looking in upon them as they sat there, would never have suspected the relations that existed between them. They appeared quite friendly and on the best of terms

together; but this was only in outward seeming.

It would be difficult to decide which one of the quintette concealed the most uneasiness beneath the indifferent mask which they wore in common, for each and every one felt that he was playing with dangerously sharp-edged tools.

Mariposa Marsh and the lads devoutly wished that they had never seen the hut or met its owner; but the veteran believed he had acted for the best, all things considered. Even if they had departed without awaiting the arrival of the shepherd, that worthy would almost certainly have noticed their tracks, and would have jumped to the conclusion that they were made by a party in pursuit of the bushrangers, to whom he would have lost no time in conveying the tidings, either by signal or word of mouth.

There would be no little danger in taking him along as a guide, but not so much as in leaving him behind, since he would be under their eyes, and the knowledge that instant death would be the reward of attempted treachery, might keep him straight. But that journey was fated to be strangely delayed.

The shepherd was still busied about his cooking, when he suddenly dropped the pan of meat, crouched low down and then leaped swiftly to one side of the hut, grasping his old, rust-covered musket, cocking and discharging it with a single motion.

The first thought of Mariposa Marsh and the boys was that the fellow had resolved upon making his escape, and with wonderful unanimity their weapons covered his form. But the shot was not fired at them, nor did the shepherd wish to leave his hut, just then.

" Quick! he shouted, " close and fasten the door or we're all dead men!"

There was no necessity for asking an explanation of his words. That was already given by the shower of wooden spears which hissed across the room or struck with a thud and hung quivering in the sides of the hut. The blacks were upon them, and only for the unusually quick sense of hearing with which the stockman was blessed, there is little doubt but what the entire party would have been assassinated before they could have raised a weapon or realized the extremity of their peril.

As it was, the blacks were taken by surprise, and one of their leading men killed by the shepherd as he led their cautious advance. Taken thus unawares, the remaining natives hurled their spears in an irregular volley without much attempt at taking aim.

The efforts of the convict were promptly seconded by his captors, and the door was closed, the heavy bar being fastened across it before the natives could muster up courage to charge and put their murderous plans into execution.

" You saved our lives, sir," said Frank, grasping the hand of the convict and pressing it warmly.

" I saved my own," was the cold response. " Had it not been in danger, too, I would not have raised a finger, but would have looked on as those black devils spitted you on their spears, and then clapped my hands in joyous approval!"

Even Mariposa Marsh could not entirely repress a shudder of aversion at the cold malignancy with which these words were enunciated, while the boys felt much as they might had they suddenly found themselves shut up in a close room with a lively rattlesnake for a companion.

"Long's you keep on a-feelin' that way," said Mariposa Marsh, stepping up to the convict and laying hold of the musket which he was now preparing to reload. "I don't reckon it'd be healthy fer you to do too much work. You mought make a mistake an' send a bullet or a load o' shot through a white skin instead of a black."

"You mean to disarm me—not let me have a chance to fight for my own life?" demanded the stockman, his eyes aglow with an evil light.

"That's jest what I do mean, anyhow ontel matters look more dubersome then they do now," was the quiet but firm decision of the veteran. "Ef the time comes when we're hard pushed—when we hev to fight each fer himself—then I'll give you back your weepoms; but ontel then, I reckon we kin do the fightin' fer ourselves an' you too."

The convict, who saw that the odds were all against him, sullenly yielded up his weapons, which Mariposa Marsh placed in the further corner of the hut.

Since the first flurry, following the failure of their surprise, nothing had been heard of the natives, and the boys began to think that they had abandoned the adventure.

"You needn't think that," said Mariposa Marsh who read their thoughts as correctly as though they had been uttered aloud. "We hain't see'd the last o' the pizen imps, nur we won't nuther, ontel we make a few more button-holes in thar black hides. It's ag'in' thar ligion to make a 'tack after the sun hes set, an' thar doin so now, shows how mighty mad they be. Ginerally they're afraid to stir at night away from the fires which they keep always burnin' in front o' thar gunyoos, or bark shanties. They think the dark is full o' evil spirits which would suck thar blood ef they was ketched away from the lights, an' believe it's sure death ef they happen to let the fires go out in front o' thar huts."

"Then how do you account for their attacking us now?"

"They're part o' the gang we licked to-day, I reckon. They hev got rid o' some o' thar superstitious idees since the whites come in so thick, an' th' nat'r'l longin' fur revenge hes made them overbold."

Mariposa Marsh appeared to know a good deal about the habits and superstitions of the natives, although he had declared more than once that this was his first visit to Australia. But just then the lads were too excited to be critical.

There was no time for further conversation, for just then the blacks gave unmistakable proof that they were still afoot and meaning mischief. Through one of the small loopholes with which the hut had been provided when built, a spear was cast, which narrowly escaped striking Mariposa Marsh in the throat, tearing its way through his bushy beard and then

expending its force on the insensate wall beyond.

"That fire must be putt out—only leave a few coals. An' you, Mat, kin keep a eye on our gentle fri'nd yender. Ef he tries any o' his tricks, put a ball through his cabeza!"

These orders, uttered in a sharp, incisive tone that admitted of no demur, were promptly obeyed, and the few coals which were left did not give light enough to endanger the defenders by shining through the loop-holes and showing the natives where to strike.

Mariposa Marsh cautiously approached one of the loops, and peering through it, soon after caught a glimpse of a dusky figure crawling over the ground. He sent a bullet from his rifle at the shadow, and had the grim satisfaction of knowing that his lead had not gone astray, for, with an unearthly cry, the native rolled over on his back, flinging his limbs about in death-agony. But only for a moment. Then he lay motionless.

A chorus of angry yells and hoots came from the fellows of the slain black, and a number of spears and waddies were showered upon the building. Fortunately none of the missiles entered at any of the loops, and Mariposa Marsh chuckled grimly as he sought another victim. But that death-shot had taught the natives caution, and he looked in vain.

Though it was clear that the black fellows had the place still closely invested, those inside did not get a chance for another shot, and the hours crept slowly along until the night was fully half spent before the blacks made their presence felt once more.

Still they were not idle, though they worked with such silence and circumspection that not one of the besieged had the faintest idea of the diabolical plan which the enemy had concocted for the purpose of obtaining their coveted revenge, until the pungent smell of smoke and the dull-red glow siftin' through the loop-holes on the side of the hut toward the wind told them of the fearful peril which threatened.

"The pizen imps mean to roast us alive!" cried Mariposa Marsh, vainly striving to peer out at one of the smoke-filled loops, in hopes of striking one more blow for vengeance.

A chorus of shrill yells of demoniac exultation came from the outside, as though the enemy had overheard and comprehended the import of this startled exclamation.

"In ten minutes more this place will be like an oven. In twice that length of time we will be dead and toasted to a turn!" uttered the convict, with a hollow laugh.

"You won't be no better off, thank the Lord!" growled Mariposa Marsh. "I'll make sure o' you, an' then the rest o' us'll open the door an' die a-fightin' the pizen imps!"

"Give me my weapons, and I'll fight with you," said the shepherd, his eyes aglow. "I swear, by the memory of my dead mother, that I will not play you false in this! I can show you a method of escape, but refuse to trust me and we will all die here together!"

"I'll trust you," returned Mariposa, impressed by the convict's manner. "It's sure death here anyhow, an' I don't reckon you kin make it any wuss."

"I'll lead you out of this without a hair of our heads being scorched!" cried the shepherd, hastily loading his musket. "And we'll read those cursed blacks a lesson they won't easily forget! Ready, now, and follow me!"

As he spoke, he tore aside the rude pallet, revealing a trap door let into a stout frame. Raising this, he stepped down into a dark tunnel which extended under the wall against which the fire had been kindled, and signed to the marveling veteran and his young allies to follow in his tracks.

In silence they obeyed, being obliged to creep on their hands and knees for some twenty yards, then emerging from the tunnel through another door, which had been carefully strewn over with dirt and leaves.

"The black fiends are all gathered before the hut, expecting us to open the door when the heat grows unbearable. We can crawl around under cover, give them one volley, then charge and clean them out before they can recover from their surprise," whispered the convict.

As there would be no safety for any of them until the natives were thoroughly whipped, this was the wisest course to pursue, and Mariposa Marsh at once consented.

The natives' were huddled in a clump under cover of a few bushes, but the light of the blazing building revealed them clearly enough, and the five guns were emptied into their midst. Then, with loud cries, the whites charged, using their revolvers briskly.

The surprise was complete, and though a few of the surviving blacks showed brief fight, five minutes later the last living native had taken to his heels in hasty flight.

Mariposa Marsh cast a hasty glance around them, then a fierce oath parted his lips.

"I might 'a' known it! The pizen imp has given us the slip, after all!"

Neither Mariposa Marsh nor any one of the three boys had received any injury during the brief flurry which preceded the flight of the terrified blacks, but the same glance which told the veteran his young friends were all right, showed him that the shepherd had vanished as though the earth had opened to swallow him up forever.

"Kiver, boys!" cried Mariposa Marsh, remembering the venomous hatred betrayed by the stock-keeper, both in words and looks. "Take to kiver or the pizen varmint 'll be tryin' to pick us off one by one from out the darkness beyant!"

CHAPTER VII.

WALKING INTO THE SNARE.

No further warning was needed, for the boys well knew that the hang-dog convict was none too good to commit such a deed, and this abrupt disappearance looked very suspicious.

With one accord they sought the nearest shelter which suited their individual tastes, intending to lie there, protected from the glow and heat of the furiously burning but, until they could devise some method of escaping the double danger which threatened them. But then came a sharp, wondering cry from Harold as he started quickly back from the bush he had chosen, drawing a revolver as he did so.

"What is it? Snake or two-legged critter?" hurriedly uttered Mariposa Marsh, arising from his covert, forgetful of the danger he might thus be incurring.

"A man—it looks like the shepherd—dead, I reckon!"

In an instant Mariposa Marsh and the two boys were beside Harold, peering down into the shadow cast by the bush under which lay the object which had so startled the youngster.

A single glance showed the cat-eyed veteran that it was indeed the convict, lying like one dead, and grasping hold of the rude, sheepskin garments, he dragged the body forth, turning it over so that the full glow of the blazing hut fell upon the blood-stained face. A brief examination convinced the old man that the shepherd was yet living, though apparently knocked senseless by a blow from some hard object. Such indeed was the case. The convict had not the slightest intention of deserting from his captors, or of shirking his share of the fight. He had emptied his heavily loaded musket into the closely crowded ranks of the enemy, then been foremost in the charge which followed that deadly volley. But before he had time to deal his hated enemies another blow, he was knocked senseless by a waddy hurled by one of the blacks. The weapon struck him on the temple, but happened to be a glancing stroke, or his earthly race would have ended then and there.

Mariposa Marsh brushed the blood and matted hair aside, and quickly satisfied himself that there were no bones fractured, then raised the limp body in his arms and bore it over to the little spring, saying with a grim grin:

"No use wastin' good whisky on the pizen critter when cold water 'll do jest as well."

A liberal application of cold water soon effected a cure in the convict's case, and with a groan and a few muttered words, he recovered his consciousness.

"Twas a mighty cluss graze you hed, old feller," said Mariposa Marsh with a grim smile, "but I don't reckon you was born to die o' a lick from a black nigger's club."

"They're gone, then? We whipped them?" unsteadily.

"All's gone that could travel onto tbar own legs," was the significant response. "A few on 'em was too tired to run. They lay out yender, painted red, in spots!"

"You have been doctoring me—why do that? Better have let me die!" muttered the shepherd, with averted eyes.

"Cold water's the only med'cine I wasted, an' I don't begrudge that nur the time I spent. You hain't showed us whar that pizen Spring Steel an' his gang hangs out, yit, or mebbe I mought 'a' let you shift for yourself."

"Your bark is worse than your bite, old man," said the convict, and there was a softness in his tones that had not marked them before. "I have a little of the feelings of a man remaining, though you may not believe it. You trusted to my word, and put weapons in my hands, which I might have used against you and your friends. Then you cared for me here, when I was helpless. I will not forget it. I will show you that I am not wholly a cur."

Let me know what I can do to serve you, and I will do it at the cost of my life."

When the convict began this earnest speech, Mariposa Marsh listened to him with a cynical suspicion, but before he ended, he was completely disarmed. If the convict was not sincere in his utterances, then he was a most finished actor.

"Thar's only one way you kin serve us, as I knows on," replied Mariposa Marsh, in a more cordial tone. "We want to find Spring Steel, an' you're the only one as knows the road."

"I will lead you there, if you still insist upon it; but I warn you that we will be running great risks. He will never be captured alive."

"Ef the risk is great, so is the pay—or will be fer you. That young gal is the only child o' Henry Brady, a magistrate who has big 'fluence with the governor. Why, be give his promise to git a ticket-o'-leave-man a free pardin' jist fer givin' him an' his wife a lift on a dray to Melbourne! You kin judge from that what he'd be willin' to do fer a man who holped rescue his only child from those pizen imps."

"I'll do all I can, though I don't much care about a pardon for myself. I'm all alone in the world, without a living friend or relative. But never mind that. When shall we start?"

"How long will it take us to git thar? Kin we make the rifle afore daylight comes?"

"No; not in the dark," was the prompt response. "The distance is not so great—only about a dozen miles, at the outside—but the trail is not an easy one to find or keep without the aid of daylight. Still, I'll do my best, if you prefer starting out now."

Mariposa Marsh called in the three boys to ask their opinions before giving his decision. Neither of them were particularly desirous of undertaking a tramp through the night, after what they had already experienced, and said as much.

"I don't know as I blame ye none," observed the veteran. "We've did a heap o' hard trampin', whipped the black fellows twice, an' then bin burned out o' house-an'-home to top off with. I reckon we've airned a few hours' sleep an' rest."

"There's a place a little way back yonder where we can rest until day without much danger of being disturbed, even if the black fellows should take it into their heads to return, which is not at all likely. But the light of this fire may attract other and even more dangerous foes. Over there we cannot easily be found, and the hole in the hill is such that one man can hold the entrance while the others sleep."

"Lead the way, then," said Mariposa Marsh, arising. "The sooner we git thar the more time we'll hav fer rest an' snoczin'. I feel like I could sleep a week at a stretch!"

A short walk carried them to the place spoken of, which proved to be a smell but dry den or cave underneath a huge rock in the hillside, which had at no very distant day been the retreat of some wild animal, as the scent evidenced. But our friends were not in a critical mood, and thankfully occupied their new quarters. The shepherd volunteered to stand watch, but Mariposa Marsh decided otherwise. Though he now believed that the convict had concluded

to act with them in good faith, he was too wary a leader to throw unnecessary temptation in the man's way.

Without betraying any resentment, the stock-keeper curled himself up in the further extremity of the den, and soon fell asleep. The watch was divided between the other four, and thus the remainder of the night was spent, without any adventures or unpleasant interruptions whatever.

Mariposa Marsh evinced no particular hurry in taking his departure, but had the stockman butcher another sheep and cook a portion of it at the still glowing ruins of the hut, while he made a careful reconnaissance to see if the light of the burning building had been the means of drawing thither any human beings; but failed to make any such discovery.

"Thar's no 'ticlar need o' bein' in a hurry," he explained to the somewhat puzzled boys as he gnawed away at a juicy mutton-chop. "I kin take my sheer o' tough fightin' when thar's no way o' gittin' around it, but from all a'counts that Spring Steel is a bad man, an' ef we give him a chance he'd jest as like as not shorten the number o' our mess, which wouldn't be pleasant to none o' us."

"But we can't expect to rescue Miss Brady without a fight," said Frank, shortly.

"I ain't so sure 'bout that. Thar's sech a thing as sarcumvention, as mebbe you've hearnt; an' that's our game jest now. We'll find whar the pizen imps hang out, an' study out the best way o' gittin' inside thar lines; then we'll lay low ontel dark comes to kiver our movements, crawl up an' steal away the young leddy. Ef the pizen imps foller us, then we'll lend 'em all the lead they kin swaller."

The lads plainly saw that this was the best plan that offered, under the circumstances, and made no more objections.

As the provisions prepared for their journey the evening before had been destroyed in the burning hut, Mariposa Marsh had the shepherd cook another supply, which he divided out until each one in the little party was provided with rations for several hearty meals. Not until then did he bid the stock-keeper set forward along the trail.

"Thar's one thing you don't want to fergit, mate," he added, impressively. "We want you to show us the place whar Spring Steel and his pizen imps hang out, but we'll choose our own time fer a introduction to 'em."

"I will take you to a point from whence you can see, yet remain unseen, as long as you care to stop under cover."

The fellow made a good guide, never at a loss for a moment. He was silent, only speaking when first addressed, and then wasting no more breath than was strictly necessary. A great change had come over him, and our friends felt that it was a change decidedly for the better.

There was nothing of particular moment to mark their progress. They saw nothing of human life, and an occasional bird fluttering through the shadows, or a snake gliding across their path, were the only incidents that occurred to break the dull monotony of their morning tramp. They proceeded leisurely, for Mariposa Marsh did not expect to effect the liberation of

the young lady before the shades of night descended to lend its friendly cover, and consequently was in no particular haste to arrive at the rendezvous of the bushrangers.

"A few rods further, and I can show you the point I promised," suddenly uttered the convict guide, turning around and pointing up the hill. "From up there you can see where you had best lie in wait until ready for work. We are not more than two miles from the retreat of Spring Steel."

"Good enough! Lead the way up thar. It'll be a good chainte fer us to rest a little an' eat our dinner. My old stomjacket says it's high noon!"

"You understand? I can't show you the retreat of the bushrangers from this hill; that lies over south, nearly two miles further on; but I can point out the rising ground which commands a view of the place they occupy as a rendezvous."

"That's all we need fer the present. Time a-plenty fer the rest," replied Mariposa Marsh.

"We can spend an hour up there, resting and eating. Just wait here for a moment, and I'll fill my canteen from a little spring down yonder. We'll need fresh water to wash down the cold meat," added the convict, laying down his musket and starting off down the slope at a rapid pace without waiting for a reply.

Mariposa Marsh felt a vague suspicion as the guide made this proposal, and his lips were parted to bid the convict halt, when his doubts were lulled to rest by this voluntary disarming. Surely, if the fellow was playing them false, and meditating an escape, he would not leave his gun behind of his own accord. Yet, as several minutes passed by without the man making his reappearance, the veteran began to grow uneasy, and he had just arisen with the intention of going in quest of the guide, when that worthy was seen ascending the slope.

"The spring has failed, and the little pool of water in the basin below, is very warm and unfit to drink," he said, not appearing to notice the suspicious looks of Mariposa Marsh. "We will have to make out with what water we have, until we pass into the next hollow. Over there is a spring that I have never known to fail in the driest seasons."

"You didn't see nobody while you was gone?"

"No. I noticed the trail of Spring Steel and his mates where they crossed the soft ground below the spring, but that was made yesterday, about noon, I judge."

The innocent manner in which these words were spoken, made Mariposa Marsh feel ashamed of his suspicions, and he asked no more questions, but bade the convict lead on.

A fair view was spread before them when the top of the little hill was reached, but their attention was principally drawn toward the point indicated by the convict as that which overlooked the retreat of Spring Steel and his bushrangers.

"That hill is a mile and a half from here, taking into consideration the trail which we must follow in order to gain it," said the shepherd. "Beyond that, and not half a mile distant, is where Spring Steel has his hiding-place."

"Are we not running a useless risk by standing here?" asked Frank Freeman. "If the bushrangers are expecting pursuit, they will naturally have spies posted on the lookout, and there is nothing to hinder them from seeing us if they should happen to glance in this direction."

"Yender is the bushes that will give us kiver an' shade at the same time," said Mariposa Marsh, pointing a little to the left. "We'll hunker down thar an' eat our grub."

The youngsters were willing enough to seek shelter from the blazing sun, and the party soon found themselves in snug quarters, comfortably discussing the merits of the cold provisions which they had brought with them.

The convict had apparently lost the feeling of constraint which had rendered him so taciturn since the burning of his hut, and now proved himself a most entertaining companion, telling strange and thrilling tales of his experience in the bush since he succeeded in obtaining a ticket-of-leave.

He had much to say about the notorious Spring Steel, and if one half that he told was true, then never before lived a more cunning or more unscrupulous bushranger than the man whom they had so recklessly undertaken to circumvent. The convict was in the middle of one of these startling reminiscences, when he saw that Mariposa Marsh abruptly ceased eating, his head slightly inclined in an attitude of acute attention, while a peculiar glow filled his eyes, fixed on vacancy. The veteran's suspicions were aroused by some sound which he heard, but the convict did not wait for those suspicions to be expressed in words.

Swift as thought his bony fist shot out and landed with stunning force directly beneath the ear of the old man, knocking him end over end a dozen feet away, where he lay quivering in every limb, like an ox felled in the shambles.

The boys uttered a simultaneous cry of angry amazement, but before they could grasp a weapon, the treacherous convict swung his musket around by the barrel, knocking Frank and Mat over with the same stroke, then dealt Harold a heavy kick in the stomach as he passed, uttering a loud, peculiar cry as he plunged into the bushes—a cry that was instantly taken up and repeated by a dozen voices. And then as many rudely-dressed, heavily-bearded men, armed to the teeth, burst through the bushes and fell upon the badly demoralized party.

Mariposa Marsh was still insensible from the effects of that terrible blow, while neither of the three boys were in a fit condition to make any effectual resistance. Thus, without a single shot being fired, or a blow struck by themselves, our friends were all four overpowered and their arms firmly bound behind them by the party which they had so confidently counted on worsting, Spring Steel the notorious bushranger, and his gang of outlawed desperadoes!

The cunning convict had led them into a deadly snare!

His repentance had all been feigned. He had lied to them about the location of Spring Steel's retreat. He had secretly given the signal to the man posted on the lookout, and pretended to visit the spring, in order to gain a word with

nim unseen. He told the outlaw where they were intending to halt, and bade him bring up the bushrangers as speedily as possible. Then he played his part when the keen-eared veteran caught the noise unavoidably made by the enemy as they stole forward.

A grating imprecation hissed through Mariposa Marsh's clinched teeth as he awoke to consciousness, only to find himself firmly bound, and realized how he had been betrayed. He exerted every muscle to burst his bonds, but in vain.

"You came out to shear, but I reckon you'll git shorn instead," said a tall, evil-looking man, dressed from head to foot in kangaroo-skins. "Twas a bold adventure, but I reckon it will prove a dear one for you all in the end."

Mariposa Marsh made no reply to this significant threat. His rage was too great, and he nearly suffocated with it when he recognized among the party, not only the traitorous shepherd, but Kentuck as well—the man who had deserted them!

"Set them on thar feet an' lead 'em over to camp. If any of 'em tries to jump fer the bush, give 'em a bullet."

The prisoners overheard this sanguinary order, and they knew that it would be unhesitatingly carried out if the brutally fierce countenances of the bushrangers were any criterion to go by. They realized the utter folly of making any such attempt, and followed their captors to the retreat, which was only a few hundred yards away. In fact, they had already passed it by in gaining the summit of the little hill.

Once within the cunningly contrived retreat, the prisoners were conducted before Spring Steel, who sat on a couch of sheepskins, a huge flask of liquor between his knees. In an arrogant style he questioned them, and as Mariposa Marsh knew that the shepherd had already betrayed their purpose, he uttered the exact truth, unflinchingly. The bushrangers were gathered around, and the shepherd finally spoke up:

"There's only one thing to be done. They must be forever silenced, or I can be of no more service to you. If suffered to go free, the whole police force would be put on our track. Give them to me, and I will agree that they shall never rise up in witness against us!"

Nor was Kentuck any the less eager for their death. He had joined them for the purpose of insuring the finding of the judge and his wife, thus hastening the ransom demanded.

Spring Steel listened to their arguments with a dark scowl, then bluntly told them that their lives rested in his hands; he would dispose of them as he saw fit. This decision was not born of mercy, but Spring Steel was half drunk, and when in liquor he was stubborn as any mule. Perhaps these very efforts were the means of saying the prisoners' lives!

"I don't say I won't kill you, fer three o' you four are sentenced to death; but I'll give you a good night's rest fu'st. In the mornin' you three youngsters'll draw lots to see which one 'll be spared. The lucky one 'll hev his ears crapped, his nose cut off, his tongue split, an' be sent to Melbourne with a note statin' that the gal will be served the same way, only wuss, ef the ransom money ain't paid right off."

"That'll do. Take 'em away and tie 'em up," concluded the drunken autocrat.

He was promptly obeyed, and the prisoners were left alone to ponder over their terrible doom.

CHAPTER VIII.

A DIABOLICAL PLOT.

THE captives were bound hand and foot, after having been stripped of money, weapons and everything else of the slightest value to their captors, who were not sparing of their jeers and taunts while thus occupied.

"I told you, old fool," said the treacherous stockman, with malignant enjoyment in his face and words. "I told you, old fool, that you would have showed your wisdom by leaving me to die when the black fellows rocked me to sleep. But you were not content to leave well enough alone, and here you are, condemned to death, while I am free to draw other simpletons into the snare."

"I will live to see you die the death of a dog—to see your treacherous carcass thrown aside to rot, or be devoured by dingoes and vultures—"

The convict uttered an angry curse as these words fell with almost prophetic fervor from the lips of the old man, and with the dastardly malignance which was one of his strongest characteristics, he dealt the helpless prisoner a heavy kick in the mouth with his dirty shoe, cutting short his prophecy.

Blood followed the brutal kick, but Mariposa Marsh never flinched, while the look of utter contempt deepened in his eyes, serving to still further enrage the convict. Had not the other bushrangers, fearing the anger of their chief, interfered and dragged the maddened rascal away, there almost certainly would have been murder done. The fellow had been forced to bottle up his anger and hatred so long; had been obliged to play a part totally foreign to his brutal, bloodthirsty nature, that now the enforced restraint was removed, he was but little better than a madman.

Left to themselves for the time being, though there was not a moment that they were not under the eyes of some one of the enemy, the prisoners had ample opportunity for viewing their awkward predicament in its true light.

There was no room for doubting that it was by far the most perilous situation they had ever occupied, and hopeful as boys proverbially are, neither Frank, Harold nor Mat could see the faintest prospect of their escaping with life, unless, indeed, the chief of bushrangers should cause his diabolical threats to be carried out—and such frightful mutilation would be even worse than death itself!

Each recognizing a congenial spirit in the other, Kentuck and the shepherd came together and were not long in swearing eternal friendship. This was the first time they had ever met in person, though they knew each other well by reputation, both being allies and agents of Spring Steel.

Kentuck, not having been furnished free transportation across the ocean "at the queen's expense," was at liberty to follow the occupation for which he was best fitted, and he did so

until he got into trouble in Melbourne. After that the police made the city too hot for him, and he was compelled to abandon the streets for "fresh fields and pastures new." In other words, to seek an asylum with his employer, Spring Steel, until the worst of the storm should blow over.

These two rascals came together, and over a bottle of liquor soon arrived at a perfect understanding, the main point of which was the death of Mariposa Marsh. They were not content to leave his fate in the hands of their chief. Though the death-grip of Spring Steel had become proverbial, their evil conscience made them fear that the bushranger would prove false to his reputation in this one instance.

"Sensee he bess tuck to drinkin' so hardly, nobody kin put any dependence onto him," muttered Kentuck, after a cautious glance around him. "He may take a fool notion into his noddle at any minnit to sot 'em all free. Then what? The old critter ain't no fool. Fu'st thing he'll blow on us all. He'll hev us all marked down an' spotted, 'specially you an' me. He'll guide the mounted police, an' never stop ontel he's hunted the hull kit an' caboodle down!"

"If he is given the chance to do so, then we deserve our fate," as cautiously responded the shepherd. "If you will do your part as well as I do mine, then not one of the four will live to see the light of another day."

"I'll do anythin' 'cept butt my head ag'inst a rock—otherwise Spring Steel. He's a heap bad medicine he is!"

"He will praise us instead of condemning," added the stock keeper with a low, cunning laugh. "Listen, and bear well in mind what I tell you."

The two plotters drew still closer together, fearing lest any other should overhear their words.

"The night will be dark, from the looks of the clouds; but if not, still we can manage it. I will pay the prisoners a visit, pretending I am a secret friend—"

"A'er what has happened? A'er your leadin' of 'em into a trap, an' then tryin' your level best to git 'em killed?"

"They will not know me, even should the moon shine out clearly. Before the queen kindly gave me a passage across the briny, I was an actor, and one whose name was known wherever the drama found a foothold. I can alter my voice, my features, my person, so my own mother would fail to recognize me. Much less talent will suffice with these fellows. They will be too anxious to escape from the peril that threatens them in the morning, to be fastidious or critical to-night. They will not recognize me, be sure of that. They will think me some soft-hearted member of the gang who is afraid of blood-letting, and if you do your duty well, they will not live long enough to find out their mistake."

"You mean fer me to lay in ambush with some o' the boys?"

"Something of the sort, but not just that. We would have to trust too many persons with our secret, in that way, and one of them might let the truth leak out. We will wait until the boys are all asleep, and your turn comes to

mount guard over the prisoners. If that does not fall to you by lot, then you must play sleeplessness and volunteer to relieve the man on watch. You must not keep too close to the captives, but allow me room to creep up to them and set the old man free, bidding him release his mates. Then you must pretend to fall asleep, but keep an eye on them, so that the moment they fairly start to flee, you can give the alarm and rouse the camp.

"Then it will be our own fault if any of the four be captured alive. They will be unarmed, save with a knife which I will have to leave the old man, so he can set the others free. We can shoot them down before the boys are fairly awake."

"But ef the clouds don't cl'ar away I'll bev to stay so cluss by that they will be afread to stir, or else they may slip away an' I never know it in time."

"I have thought of that, too," said the convict, with a self-satisfied chuckle. "You must give us plenty of elbow room, whether cloudy or bright. If necessary, I will give you a signal when the right moment for action comes."

Some further conversation followed, but as the cunning and fiendish plot has been made sufficiently clear for the full comprehension of the reader, there is no necessity for giving additional details here.

The hapless prisoners had not the faintest suspicion of the dangerous plotting going on against their lives, though that knowledge could hardly have imbibited their thoughts, since all save Mariposa Marsh had resigned every hope. Yet the lads made no idle lamentation. Now, as ever, they were "pure grit," and though they believed their fates were sealed beyond all probability of chance, they were resolved that none of their captors should taunt them with showing craven fear.

As the time wore on and the evening drew near, Frank Freeman, tired of pondering upon their unpleasant predicament, began to look around him curiously and wonder where the young lady could be, for whom they had dared so much in vain.

Until now he had forgotten all about her, and consequently had felt no wonder at not seeing or hearing anything of her. This was natural enough, for life is very sweet to the youthful, and, after all, she was a total stranger to him.

Despite his prone position, Frank quickly discovered a small hut of brush and bark, that was hidden from casual observation amid the shadows cast by the trees and bushes which surrounded the rude structure, and he felt no doubt that May Brady was kept a prisoner therein nor was he mistaken.

Spring Steel, fully appreciating the monetary value of his fair prize, had taken his position close to the hut, resolved even in drunkenness to lessen the temptation to his rough followers by showing them that an entrance could only be effected in his teeth. Nor was this precaution unnecessary.

There were some among the bushrangers whom only the certainty of death at the hands of their chief had kept from assaulting the fair captive. They feared neither God nor the devil,

but they *did* fear man, in the guise of Spring Steel, and fortunate it was for the poor girl that such was the case.

Though Mariposa Marsh had firmly resolved to effect his escape that night, he made no efforts toward that end while the light of day lasted, for a good and sufficient reason. He had closely observed his captors, and being a fair judge of human nature, he had read them aright in one respect at least. He saw that they were not stinted in the matter of provisions and felt sure that they would not neglect feeding their prey.

In doing this, they would in all probability release their hands from bonds, and they would be almost sure to notice the fact if he should succeed in loosening them before that time; or even if they should overlook this, his labor would be wasted by the thongs being tied afresh after the meal.

Succeeding events proved how closely he had reasoned.

Being in no wise stinted themselves, the bushrangers evidently felt that they could afford to be generous in a small way and seemed resolved that the doomed prisoners should have at least one more square meal, releasing their hands and pressing palatable if rudely-cooked viands upon them, until even Mariposa Marsh was forced to cry a truce, though not until his prowess in that line had excited the wonder of the outlaws, who seemed puzzled to understand where his stowage-room lay.

Nor had the boys lost their appetites, though, as Mariposa Marsh through motives of prudence had not yet informed them of the hopes he entertained, they believed that death was steadily drawing nearer them. They ate heartily, despite the jests of the enemy, which were more pointed than witty.

Then, as the shadows of night grew deeper and the bushrangers freshened up their fires, feeling safe against discovery in that secluded spot, Mariposa cautiously told his young mates of his desperate resolve to escape, and advised them to try their best to loosen the bonds which confined their hands.

The chances were that one among the four would succeed, through some defect in the thongs or carelessness on the part of those who had tied them. A hint was all that was needed and the spirits of the lads rose at the simple words. They would not fail if patient perseverance could insure success.

Meanwhile the two outlaws, Kentuck and the convict shepherd, were also in high spirits, for everything seemed working favorably for their treacherous plans. Kentuck was appointed one of the guards without any *finesse* on his part to awaken suspicion in the future, and his turn of duty would bring him on guard just before midnight, the most favorable time of all.

A few of the bushrangers lay down early and went to sleep, wearied with the idleness of the day just ended, but the majority were not yet satiated with the strong liquors which very seldom fell to their lot in such unstinted measure, and carried on their drunken orgies until late in the night, though they did not entirely forget their caution even when deepest in their cups, and drank with a bridle on their tongues.

Spring Steel, though he had drank enough liquor, almost, to float a jolly-boat, was still awake and not more than "half-seas-over." He was stationed before the brush hut in which May Brady was confined, ready to defend her or punish a follower if the occas'ion demanded, and it was to his drunken vigilance that the rioting bushrangers paid deference by maintaining an outward semblance of order.

Meantime the prisoners were improving every minute, but without the most encouraging success. Their bonds had been applied by skillful hands, and were of tough, unyielding material.

It was not many minutes before each one of the three boys were secretly but firmly convinced that their utmost efforts were in vain, and that the whole night would not be long enough for them to effect an escape unaided. Still, each one persisted even against hope, keeping this belief to themselves, for fear its utterance would discourage the others.

Matters were a little more encouraging with Mariposa Marsh, thanks to his greater cunning and dexterity. His bonds were of the same materials, and had been quite as firmly knotted as any of the rest; but while the thongs were being applied, he bowed his wrists slightly outward in such a manner that while the cords were drawn tightly, the moment he relaxed his stiffened muscles, he found his hands had a little play.

Unfortunately his hands were very much larger than his wrists, and he soon found that he was but little better off than before. He could slip neither hand through, nor could his utmost exertion of strength burst the thongs.

For hours he worked in vain, then, in desperation, he essayed afeat that was doubly dangerous, for he ran the risk of being observed by the outlaws, as well as of dislocating one or both of his arms.

With a fortitude and dogged disregard of pain that would have done credit to an Indian warrior at the stake, he raised his bound hands inch by inch, supporting them against the tree-trunk at his back until, with a sudden desperate effort that caused the cold drops of bitter agony to start out upon his forehead, he brought both arms over his head and before him, where they dropped upon his lap that sounded as though they were torn from their sockets!

For a few minutes thereafter he was perfectly helpless, and though not a sound was allowed to escape his tightly compressed lips, Mariposa Marsh believed that terrible effort had hopelessly crippled him.

But matters were not so bad, and before long he had his hands raised to his mouth, doggedly chewing away at the stubborn thongs that alone, as he fondly believed, lay between him and liberty.

All else appeared unusually favorable for their escape.

The sky was shrouded in a mass of dense clouds. The fires kindled by the bushrangers were dying out for lack of replenishing, and nearly the whole band of outlaws had surrendered to the combined power of liquor and somnolence.

There was at least one guard on duty, but he

scarcely cast a glance toward the sheltered spot where the prisoners were reclining.

Thus matters stood when, with a long-drawn sigh, Mariposa Marsh succeeded in gnawing through the thongs, and stretched out his arms as though to shake hands with freedom!

Then, with a fierce thrill of mingled despair and rage, he whipped his hands behind him, reclining as before against the trunk of the tree.

He had caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure approaching, and believed that his partial freedom had been detected. If so, he knew that all was lost, and like a wild beast driven to bay, he resolved that he would at least taste of vengeance.

Though he did not suspect the truth for a moment, that shadowy form was the convict stock-keeper, bent on carrying out his truly diabolical plot!

"I'll not die wholly unavenged, if that fellow once comes within reach of my fingers before he discovers the truth!" was the deadly resolve that shaped itself within his brain as he sullenly awaited the catastrophe.

With the fierce hatred that boiled in his veins, he knew that he could succeed in this, did the outlaw come within reach of his unbound hands, before aid could come to tear his victim from his vengeful grasp. He felt as men do who dare and accomplish what would be simply impossible under ordinary circumstances. A quick glance showed him that the man on guard duty was bending over the embers as though the power of sleep was gradually but surely prevailing over the sense of duty; then he turned his gaze toward the spot where he last saw the dimly outlined shadow.

CHAPTER IX.

FRIENDS SOMETIMES WORSE THAN ENEMIES.

The shadow had changed its location, but was still approaching, and Mariposa Marsh nerved himself for the tragedy which he felt must almost inevitably follow.

The three lads were aware that there was trouble brewing, though they never uttered a sound. The sudden movement of their leader told them that much, but they knew no more, since it chanced that neither of them had observed the shadowy figure as it silently stole near.

The shape drew nearer, but then paused just beyond the reach of the veteran's hands, and he felt a cold thrill of despair, for he believed that the truth was discovered. But only for an instant, for then the figure spoke, low and guardedly, as though fearful of attracting the attention of the somnolent guard by the sound of his voice.

"Don't make a move or a sound to show that anybody's talkin' to ye," the figure muttered in a husky, muffle'd tone, that sounded strangely unnatural. "Be sensible an' I'll set ye all free. But you must help yourselves, so nobody won't spect me o' havin' a finger in the pie. You understand?"

Mariposa Marsh nodded. He dared not trust his voice.

"I b'long to the gang, an' I ain't no better than I should be, but somehow my stomach turns ag'in all this bloody work. I've got three

lads at home, in the Old Country, that's much the age an' looks o' them younkers, an' somehow I couldn't sleep to-night fer thinkin' o' them. 'Peared like o' I was to set by an' do nothin' to save 'em from what'll come to 'em in the mornin' from Spring Steel, that somethin' turrible would happen to my own little lads at home!"

Here the voice trembled and grew more husky, until the shadow was compelled to pause for a few moments in order to regain control of its emotions.

"That was what was driv' into me to-night as I lay thinkin', ontel I couldn't b'ar it no longer, but made up my mind to set ye all free, though it'll be my sart' in death ef what I do now is ever found out by Spring Steel. Jest promise me one thing, an' then I'll cut your han's loose an' leave you the knife to do the rest fer yourselves. Jest promise me that you won't never breathe a word o' who helped ye, even ef you should be foller'd an' captured ag'in."

Once more Mariposa inclined his head, afraid to speak.

"I reckon I kin trust you—I must, fer I couldn't never know no rest nur peace ef I left you here to die the death o' dogs! I'd be ha'nted ferever by the faces o' them boys, which looks so much like my own little lads!"

With a gasping snuffle, that sounded as though he had hard work to keep from blubbering outright at the lugubrious picture he drew, the shadow crept closer to the veteran, drawing a long, keen knife from his belt as he did so.

He stooped low over Mariposa Marsh, and then—

A hand of iron, with fingers of steel, grasped him by the throat with resistless might, dragging him down across the old man's lap, while another hand wrested the glittering knife from his weakened grasp, then buried the long blade to its very hilt in his broad, heaving bosom!

"Ye played me fer a p'izen fool once, but ye'll never do it ag'in!" grated Mariposa Marsh, as his mighty grasp cut short the death-gurgle in the convict's throat.

The boys looked on in mute horror and amazement, tongue-tied by this—to them—unaccountable and suicidal action on the part of their leader. They had hailed the coming of the shadow with heartfelt gratitude, and their eyes were moistened by the affecting manner in which the little lads at home had been alluded to. Surely this was sheer murder!

Mariposa Marsh apparently had the power of reading their thoughts through the darkness, for, as he cautiously relaxed his stern grasp on the throat of the dead man, he said:

"It was his life or our'n! A p'izen rattle-snake don't turn into a harmless dove all at once! He tried to disguise his voice, but I knowned him—an' I reckon he won't lead no more fool critters into a trap—cuss him from top to toe!"

"You don't mean that it is—was—" trembled Frank.

"I do—it's that same p'izen shepherd that led us into the trap, an' then tried all he knewed how fer to git that Spring Steel to wipe us out!"

Mariposa Marsh spoke true. The man he had slain was none other than the treacherous convict stock-keeper, who had fallen into the pit he was digging for others. His boasted skill as an actor had availed him naught against the unrelenting hatred felt by Mariposa Marsh, who recognized him the moment he spoke, despite his change of voice and uncouth language.

Instinctively the cunning veteran divined the nature of the snare which was being set for him, and knowing that half-measures could avail him little here, he took the shortest, method of cutting the Gordian knot.

Of all the bushrangers in camp now, only one but what was fast wrapped in slumber—and he was the faithless, nodding guard yonder, Kentuck, who was impatiently waiting for the signal from his fellow conspirator which should tell him all was in readiness for the finishing blow. He could not help stealing occasional glances toward the spot where the four captives were stationed, but he learned nothing of what was transpiring from these. The night was too dark for even his eyes of hatred to overcome those twenty and more yards of gloom.

Mariposa Marsh satisfied himself that the faint sounds which accompanied his momentary struggle with the convict had not been heard by the nodding guard, then silently pushed the bleeding, ghastly burden from his lap, drawing the long, keen-bladed knife from the quivering sheath of flesh.

A sigh of relief parted his lips as the cords around his ankles gave way before the touch of the weapon, and he indulged himself in a momentary stretch of his legs that felt almost like a foretaste of freedom and paradise. But time was by far too precious for idle consumption, and Mariposa Marsh quickly moved nearer the boys, applying the keen edge of his knife to their bonds, bidding them lose no time in restoring the circulation of blood through their limbs, but not to attempt rising until they regained full control of their legs.

"You ain't a-goin' to run away an' not thry to git back any av our weapons, be ye?" muttered Mat Marley, who had deeply mourned the loss of his cherished rifle and revolvers.

"And the young lady," added Frank Freeman. "We must take her along with us, if we succeed in escapin'."

"It's all we kin do to 'tend to ourselves, an' we'll be monstrous lucky ef we git cl'r o' these p'izen critters with life in our karkidges," muttered Mariposa Marsh, impatiently. "Jest like all boys, you ain't satisfied unless you kin do or hev jest a little more than is a possibility!"

If the youngsters were not satisfied, they had discretion enough to postpone any further discussion until a more favorable moment shou'd present itself, and Mariposa Marsh was perfectly willing that such should be the case. He was all eagerness to be away from the spot where almost certain death awaited them, and when his young mates told him that they were in fit condition for the work that lay before them, he immediately led the way, creeping into the bushes, avoiding every noise that might arouse the suspicions of the somnolent guard.

But they were fated not to escape so easily. Capricious fortune, which had befriended them thus far, now served them a most scurvy trick.

Just as they found themselves in the thickest part of the covert, though not yet fairly outside of the bushrangers' camp, the blow fell.

Kentuck uttered a loud, warning shout, and sprung to his feet beside the fire, only to fall again in a limp and seemingly lifeless heap, as a musket report rung out upon the night air with terrible distinctness.

Instantly all was confusion the most intense in and around the camp.

So suddenly roused from their drunken slumbers, the bushrangers instinctively flock to a common center around the smouldering fires, grasping the first weapons their hands happened to light upon, conscious of impending peril, but for the instant unable to divine either its nature or its extent.

Prominent among them was the giant form of Spring Steel, still drunk, though rapidly growing sober, brandishing an empty liquor-flask in his hand, blinking like an overgrown owl as he stared around in quest of a victim.

All this was like the swift change of a magic lantern, and the echoes of the first musket-shot bad not yet died away when a stern, sharp voice cried out:

"Down with your weapons and surrender, or ye die like dogs!"

These words told the bushrangers what they had to expect—what the nature of the peril that threatened them, and like all men who fight with a halter around their throats, they were only rendered the more desperate as they fully appreciated their peril.

"The police is onto us, mates!" shouted Spring Steel, all traces of intoxication vanishing as though by magic. "Cut your way through the bloody—"

The end of the sentence was lost even to his own ears.

The first words from the lips of their leader gave the bushrangers just what they had lacked—pointed out a course for them to follow, and as with one accord they gripped their weapons tighter and sprung into action. But they had to deal with an enemy thoroughly trained, whose nerves had been steadied by many a fierce affray with just such characters, who knew no law but the orders of their superiors in rank, and the fierce words of Spring Steel were drowned by a heavy volley that extended completely around the encampment.

The range was so close, that despite the imperfect light, the discharge was deadly in the extreme, but three men standing erect when the flame-tinted smoke circle partially lifted upon the night air. The others were down upon the ground, writhing in the agonies of death, groaning or shrieking, or already started on their long, last journey.

"Charge!" rung out the same stern voice that had first commanded the outlaws to surrender. "Close in, men! R-member your orders—take Spring Steel alive!"

As before, obedience was instantaneous, and a full score of uniformed men converged toward the point where the chief of bushrangers stood

like a lion at bay, glaring around upon the enemy with deadly hatred flashing from his eyes.

A ruthless, bloodthirsty, conscienceless desperado though he was, there was something far from ignoble in the appearance of Spring Steel at that moment, as the police closed in around him; and the four fugitives who still crouched low in the bush, could not refrain from feeling a vague pity and admiration for the fellow.

One instant thus—then, with a howling roar that would not have disgraced a wounded lion, Spring Steel leaped upon his enemies, followed by the two bushrangers who had survived that murderous volley.

The giant wrested a carbine from the foremost policeman and struck two blows with the heavy butt before the leader of the force brought him to his knees with a strong, swift saber cut that would have cloven the head of any ordinary man to the very chin. A brief struggle, and then the three outlaws were bound hand and foot.

During this brief but bloody contest, Mariposa Marsh and the three boys had not moved a muscle, but crouched down in the bushes, breathless witnesses of the thrilling scenes.

At first they saw that their retreat was cut off, and that their only hope of escaping being fired upon or attacked by the police as bushrangers, lay in their lying low until a more favorable opportunity for introducing themselves. Then, when the police brushed past them to close in around the outlaws, breathless interest in the tragedy held them motionless until all was over—until Spring Steel went down before the enemy—and then it was too late to escape by flight, even had they felt so inclined, which they did not.

Why should they? They were friends of law and order, and surely they had nothing to fear from the police.

At command of the sergeant the police quickly freshened up the fires until the entire encampment was brilliantly lighted up, revealing every detail of the bloody scene. Only two of the bushrangers besides Spring Steel were alive and all were wounded. Three of the policemen had been slain outright, two of them with their skulls shattered like eggshells, the result of the brace of blows dealt by Spring Steel.

The sergeant summed up his losses at a glance, but seemed little if any affected by the death of his men, and in his sharp, business-like tones he said;

"There may be some of the gang drunk or skulking in the bushes. Make a close search, and if such are found, shoot them down at the first sign of resistance."

"We've got to show ourselves," hastily muttered Mariposa Marsh to the three lads. "Do as I do; hold up your paws, so's not to give 'em any excuse for pluggin' us."

So saying, he arose and stepped into the full light.

"Don't shoot!" he cried, as the astonished police mechanically raised their carbines. "We're fri'nds an' honest critters who was jest 'scapin' from the pizen bushrangers!"

"Advance, friends and honest critters," said the sergeant, with a sneer in his voice that

stung Mariposa Marsh like a slap from a bunch of nettles.

But he knew that there was no use in kicking against the pricks. They were in the power of this man and wholly at his mercy. His men were but breathing machines, subject to his will, knowing only how to carry out the orders he gave them.

So Mariposa Marsh choked down his resentment for the time being, and advanced to where the officer was standing, leaning upon his still bloody saber.

"Who and what are you?" he demanded, sharply, incisively.

"White men an' free born," tersely replied Frank, stung to the quick by his overbearing manner.

"Insolence will not serve you here, young fellow, and you had better save your breath against a time of need, which, unless your looks belie yourselves, will not be long delayed," coolly retorted the sergeant, and, as in duty bound, the men laughed heartily at their leader's wit.

Mariposa Marsh made a quick sign that checked the hot words springing to the lips of the angered lad, then turned toward the sneering sergeant, saying, in even, measured tones:

"We four were on our way to the diggings, when we were fortunate enough to be of service to Judge Henry Brady and his wife, who had been robbed and bound to a tree by Spring Steel and his gang of bushrangers, who also bore off Miss May Brady, for the purpose of exacting a heavy ransom for her. The judge believed they were playing him false, intending to retain the young lady after securing the money, and begged us to follow on the trail and endeavor to rescue his daughter, while he hastened to Melbourne to set the police on the scent. We agreed to do what we could, but were betrayed by a stock-keeper whom we secured as a guide, and were taken prisoners by the bushrangers, who swore we should die in the morning. But we managed to slip our bonds and were on the point of escaping when you made your attack."

"Why did you not make your appearance before, then? Why hide in the bushes until you were routed out by my men?"

"Because we were unarmed, and would thus be exposing ourselves to a double danger. The bushrangers would know we were enemies, and you would think we were. But as soon as the fight was over—in which we could plainly see that you needed none of our help, even had we been in condition to afford any such—we came forward."

"A very probable story, and admirably told," sneered the sergeant. "But we find you in very questionable company, and you cannot blame us for regarding you with a certain degree of suspicion. You will please consider yourselves as under arrest, until we can investigate the truth of your statement."

Mariposa Marsh bowed stiffly, but had his life alone been at stake, the pompous sergeant of police would, beyond a doubt, have received a genuine surprise. The veteran, however, choked down his passion, lest the three boys should suffer also.

During this conversation, though none of the parties concerned were aware of the fact, Spring Steel had recovered his consciousness, and eagerly drank in every word that was uttered, with what emotions will soon be made clear.

Despite his evident prejudice against our friends, which was as strong as it was unaccountable even to himself, the sergeant had been strongly impressed with the truth of the explanation given by Mariposa Marsh, knowing as he did that May Brady had really been captured by the bushrangers and was even now in the little brush hut, a policeman stationed before the entrance. But he was resolved to convince himself beyond a doubt, before he released the four strangers.

For this purpose he turned his attention toward Spring Steel, who was now counterfeiting unconsciousness, believing he could not have overheard the statements of Mariposa Marsh. If he should corroborate them, then there could be no further doubt.

After a sufficient length of time, Spring Steel consented to be restored to consciousness, and stared around him with a vacant expression in his eyes until they rested upon Mariposa Marsh and his young companions, when his blood-stained face became transfigured with intense hatred, not all feigned.

"You know those persons, then?" demanded the sergeant. "Who and what are they?"

"A week ago, I'd 'a' swore that better mates never lived, but now—if I could see 'em die the de'th o' dogs, I'd make the man rich fer life that killed 'em!"

"Mates of whom?" eagerly asked the pre-judiced officer.

"Of mine, in course. They've b'longed to my gang for the past two years an' longer."

Mariposa Marsh began an indignant denial, but the sergeant made a signal, and almost before they could realize the fact, Mariposa and the lads were all four handcuffed.

"If you dare to utter a single word before I address you first, I will order my men to gag you, in addition," sternly cried the police officer, frowning. "You have been given an opportunity of telling your story, and now we will hear the other side."

If looks had the power to deal death, then the sergeant would have dropped lifeless in his tracks; but Mariposa Marsh held his tongue. No need of making a bad matter worse.

"If you are mates of his—if you have lied to me, and I find in reality that you belong to this gang of bushrangers—I will string you up to that limb overhead, like an egg-sucking cur!" sternly added the officer, then turning to the wounded outlaw: "If mates of yours why so bitter against them?"

"Because they went back on me an' the rest o' the gang. I'll tell ye how it was, an' ef I speak the shadder of a lie, may—" and Spring Steel added a volley of imprecations so bitter and blasphemous as to startle even the sergeant.

"You know all about my 'stickin' up' that gold-escort an' gittin' away with over forty thousand pounds wu'th'ou dust an' nuggets? Well, you fellers hunted me so close an' hard that I could never git no good of it, an' so left it in

the ground whar we bid it at the time. You know, too, that all the boys who was with me in that little job, got rubbed out afterwards, at one time an' another.

"I kep' the secret to my own self ontel 'bout a month ago; then I got drunk, an' the ole man yender coaxed it out o' me. Still, I wasn't sorry, fer I trusted him like I did my own self, an' never thought he'd go back onto me.

"I left him an' the boys abind when I went on that little trip which wound up with our 'stickin' up' old Brady. We was gone nearly a week, all told, an' was to randyvoo here, which we did. But while I was gone, them fellers—the four on 'em—tuck an' kerried away all that gold an' bid it somers else. They tried to kiver up thar tracks, but I found out who it was did the work, though I couldn't find nothin' of the new hidin'-place. So I come back an' tuck them pris'ners meanin' to tortur 'em ontel they let out the secret, but you come an' give me this clip on the head, which I reckon will turn out my last sickness."

An unprejudiced listener could hardly have avoided noticing several glaring discrepancies in this preposterous story, but the sergeant had decided Mariposa Marsh guilty beforehand, and was only too glad of an excuse for exercising his authority.

"You are willing to swear to the truth of this statement of yours?" he demanded.

"Yes," was the prompt response. "An' ef any o' the other boys is alive, they will tell you the same thing."

At this broad hint, the two captive bushrangers spoke up and confirmed the monstrous tales their chief had uttered, clinching their evidence with no stinted amount of oaths.

Mariposa Marsh commenced an indignant protest, but at a sign from the petty tyrant, he was thrown down and gagged, as were Frank, Mat and Harold, struggling vainly against the heavy odds. Then the sergeant spoke:

"I gave you fair warning that I would hang you out of hand, if I found you had been lying to me, and now I mean to be as good as my word. You are convicted of being a bushranger and double traitor.

"Johnson, throw a rope over that limb yonder, and string the old man up. We will keep the others for a time, to learn where they have hidden the gold they stole. Lively, there!"

This last injunction was superfluous, for the rope was being rapidly adjusted, and the noose fitted around the throat of Mariposa Marsh, even as he spoke.

Then, at a motion of his hand, the veteran was slowly hauled from the ground into mid-air!

CHAPTER X.

AN OPPORTUNE ARRIVAL.

But the veteran's life-work was not yet done.

A wild, nearly naked figure leaped through the line of bushes and stood revealed in the ruddy fire-light; a frowsy-headed, dirty, greasy Australian black, who uttered a shrill, peculiar cry, then dove back under cover as abruptly as he had made his appearance, before the astonished policemen could do more than make an irresolute show of using their weapons.

"Make fast that rope to a bush and let the old rascal hang, then prepare—"

The sentence was left unfinished, for the sergeant received a fresh and still more unpleasant shock than that given him by the dramatic appearance of the black fellow.

A white man in the uniform of a captain of mounted police stepped through the bushes, and in a sharp, peremptory tone, ordered the amateur hangmen to lower their victim.

"Slack up on that rope! The man that dares to hesitate a moment, I'll shoot down without mercy!"

The sergeant turned sharply, but the fierce curse died away and remained unuttered upon his lips as he recognized the uniform of a superior in rank. The hangmen obeyed with a promptness born of long subordination, letting the rope slip through their hands, and Mariposa Marsh fell to the ground, where he lay limp and motionless, like one from whose body the last spark of life had fled.

The keen eye of the new-comer noted this fact, and his anger flashed forth hotly as he turned upon the silent, crestfallen, but sullen sergeant, crying fiercely:

"If yonder man is dead—murdered by you, cowardly bound! I'll tear the uniform from your back and have my men kick you all the way from here to Melbourne!"

"You dare not—I have only done my duty."

"Silence! hand me your sword, and consider yourself under arrest until I can fully investigate your conduct in this truly disgraceful affair."

The sergeant gripped his sword hilt and cast a glance around him, but he saw that any attempt at open resistance would be worse than folly. He could hope for no support from his command in the face of a superior officer, and over a score men were filing into the fire lighted space after their captain. At a word from the latter, these men would fairly riddle him with bullets.

"You hav' the advantage now," he said, in a voice that trembled with mingled rage and mortification, "but I will call you to account for the terms you have used just now at the earliest possible opportunity."

"If you have murdered that gentleman yonder, the only satisfaction you'll get will be a taste of the same noose! Not a word more, or I'll clap you into irons!"

Turning his back upon the disgraced sergeant, the captain bade some of his men release the three lads, while he himself hastened to the side of Mariposa Marsh, tearing the noose from around his neck and cutting the gag from between his jaws.

The captain's anxiety, however, was of brief duration, for Mariposa Marsh smiled faintly in token of recognition.

"Jest in time, old fr'ind! I reckon I wasn't born to be hung, but it come so p'izen near it that that wasn't no fun in it! Ef you'll jest onloosen these bracelets!"

No sooner said than done; and when the thongs were cut from around his ankles, Mariposa Marsh rose to his feet, but little the worse for wear, save in a chafed throat.

The captain drew him aside, guardedly whispering:

"You haven't been doing anything since we parted to give that fellow a legal right to serve you as he has done? Not that it makes any particular difference, because I can manage to bluff my way through, anyhow; but it's best to know just where we stand."

"Nuthin' wuss then to be tuck captvye by Spring Steel an' his gang," promptly replied the veteran, casting a venomous glance toward the disgraced sergeant. "We was jest gittin' cl'r o' them, when hat ugly cuss come up an' tuck us fer part o' the outfit."

All that is here recorded occurred with wonderful rapidity, one surprise following swiftly on another's heels; and it was only now that Judge Henry Brady,

who had been left a few rods behind when Charles Cooper, captain of mounted police, made his impetuous entrance upon the scene, came forward with trembling eagerness, his tear-dimmed eyes seeking vainly for some trace of his idolized child. A terrible fear assailed him, and an agonized cry burst from his lips.

Through the night alarm; through the brief but bloody fight that ended in the all but extermination of the gang of bushrangers; through the hasty trial and condemnation of Mariposa Marsh, followed by his hanging and almost miraculous rescue from a shameful death; through the altercation which followed, until she heard and recognized the voice of her parent as he uttered that appealing cry, May Brady had remained cowering in the little hut, trembling with fear. But at that sound she forgot fear, forgot everything else, and pushing aside the policeman who was stationed before the entrance, she flew across the intervening space, and with a glad, sobbing cry of thanksgiving, was infolded in her father's arms.

The boys had just been released from their bonds, and were eye-witnesses of the joyous meeting. All were affected, though in different degrees; and one among the trio never forgot that scene—never will while he draws the breath of life.

During those few moments Cooper found time to explain to Mariposa Marsh how it was he came so opportunely there.

"As luck would have it, I met Judge Brady just before he entered the city, and so the job of recovering his daughter was placed in my hands. I started at once, for the old gentleman gave me a pretty clear description of you and the lads, yonder, and I expected no less than that you would be getting into trouble, if you were really foolhardy enough to attack Spring Steel and his outfit."

"I enlisted a black fellow as guide and trailer, and went into camp not more than two miles from this spot. Heard the sounds of firing, and made the best of our way here, just in time to save you from a dog's death."

"For which I'll thank you some o' these days, when I've got more time," said Mariposa Marsh, as their hands once more came together. "But I want to ax a favor o' you, pard."

"Consider it granted, before you utter it."

"Give that feller back his sword, an' lease him aglow."

"What, Morgan? Why, he treated you like a dog!"

"I know he did, an' that's the reason why I low to treat him like a white man," quietly retorted Mariposa Marsh.

Cooper stared at his old friend for a few moments in mute surprise, but then he seemed to read something in the old man's eyes which pleased him mightily.

"I'll do it, since I passed my word," he said, with a low, chuckling laugh. "But mind; I'm commanding officer here, and I'll not let you run too much risk."

"I don't reckon you've any 'casion to fret, mate. The old man kin most gen'ally take keev o' himself when it ain't more than a dozen onto one. You do as I ax you, an' I'll answer for the rest."

"Well, I'll put Morgan out of his misery at once; ut you must promise to hold in until after we have straightened out matters a little."

"What I've got won't smile in keepin' bottled up for a few hours," said Mariposa, bearing the captain company to where the disgraced sergeant was moodily standing.

"Sergeant Morgan," said Captain Cooper, coldly, "though my opinion of your conduct in this affair has not changed in the least, I return you your sword and release you from arrest. For which clemency thank this gentleman, not me."

But Morgan made no motion toward taking the sword, saying in a hard, suppressed tone of voice:

"If I deserved arrest ten minutes ago, I deserve it quite as much now. I prefer waiting for my reinstatement until my case is deliberated upon by my, as well as your, superiors. I give you formal notice that I shall apply for an investigation of my conduct before the proper officials, at the earliest possible moment."

"My dear sir," said Mariposa Marsh, speaking in a soft and polished tone that contrasted forcibly with his rude, uncouth exterior, "let me beg of you to reconsider your decision, if only for an hour or two. After that, you can return to arrest again, if you feel so inclined."

"How do my affairs concern you?" roughly growled the man.

"That is easily explained," added Mariposa Marsh, in the same smooth tone. "An hour ago you called me a dog—an egg sucking cur—and even went so far as to hang me, simple because I told you the truth. I swore then that if I ever got clear, I'd call you to account for it, and that is exactly what I mean to do now. If you are too cowardly to accept of your reinstatement, because you fear my punishing you, I also will be put under arrest, so I can meet you on equal grounds—for I mean to lick you like thunder an' guns!"

The sergeant stared for a moment at the speaker, then turned aside in silent disdain, half inclined to believe the old fellow either drunk or crazy.

"Don't press him too far, old man" said Cooper, laying a restraining hand upon Mariposa Marsh's shoulder, as that worthy made a motion toward following Morgan. "I don't like the idea of committing suicide. Morgan is a dead-shot, a neat hand with the sword, and the finest two-handed boxer I ever saw."

"I don't know as I keer about killin' the feller, ef I kin read him a lesson without goin' quite so fur; but he acted like a dog to me, an' I'm bound to git even. Ef he's as good with his fists as you say, I'll make him fight that way."

Captain Cooper made no reply, for just then one of his men reported that Spring Steel was apparently in a very bad way, and the surgeon believed he was at the point of death.

The strong concern with which Cooper received this report was no enigma to Mariposa Marsh, who had not yet forgotten the story of the gold-escort robbery. He knew that, though the Government laid claim to all treasure trove of that sort, but very little of the wealth accumulated by the industrious bushrangers, and unearthed by the mounted police, either white or black, ever entered its coffers. A member of the police would run the risk of being branded as a disgrace to the force should he be simple or honest—enough to include in his report the gold thus earned. That was considered part and parcel of his salary, and at the time treated of, a lucky police officer generally made his fortune in quite as little time as the smartest of our own railroad conductors.

Spring Steel was really in a bad way; a great deal more so than he had any idea of himself, though with a vague hope of bettering his situation, he was playing the part of a dying man. It had availed him thus far, that the surgeon had released his hands from the irons.

The saber-cut upon his head was the only material injury Spring Steel had received, but that was far more serious than at first imagined; his skull being fractured, and a portion of the brain exposed to view.

Captain Cooper hastened to his side, and after catching the eye of the surgeon, which plainly told him there was no hope for the fellow, he tried his subtlest powers of persuasion in hopes of getting at the golden secret, promising the wounded bushranger kind treatment and every possible comfort which he could desire, during the period he had him in charge.

"That won't be long," uttered Spring Steel, in a faint, husky voice, as though he was already at his

last gasp. "I've got my last sickness—I'm dyin' fast!"

"Nonsense! you'll live for years, yet. A simple crack on the head—what does that amount to? Why, nothing, to a man like you. I've had many a worse hurt myself, and consider I am all the sounder for them. Still, you are bound to be laid up in ordinary, for a time. While there, you will want many little comforts that only money in the hands of an outside party can supply. Or perhaps, you may be pardoned altogether, if you only confess where you have hidden the gold you took from the escort."

"Make 'em stand back then. What I've got to say is only fer you to hear," faintly gasped Spring Steel.

Fairly trembling with eagerness, Cooper gave the required order, then stooped low over the bushranger, fearful of losing a word, and with it the possibility of a fortune.

Then came a change as startling as it was unexpected.

Spring Steel clutched the captain by the throat and exerting his enormous strength to the utmost, hurled him a dozen feet away, then leaped to his feet, which also proved to be at liberty, though no one appeared to know how they came so, and dashed away at headlong speed, a hoarse, taunting laugh betraying his savage exultation. But this outburst was premature, though the movement was so unexpected that not a hand nor a weapon was raised to prevent his escape.

The desperate exertion probably caused a rush of blood to his injured head, for he perceptibly faltered for an instant, then made two more mighty leaps, like a death-stricken buck. His toe struck against a root, and he was hurled headlong against the trunk of a tree with tremendous violence, the shock shattering his fractured skull like an empty gourd!

Spring Steel was dead before any one could reach the spot where his body lay!

CHAPTER XI.

SPRING STEEL'S GOLDEN SECRET.

WHAT Captain Cooper said when he recovered his feet and realized that the golden secret was forever lost to him, will hardly do to record in these pages.

Still, it was not long before the customary degree of order settled over the encampment; all of the party were too thoroughly accustomed to tragic scenes for the death of the notorious bushranger to long disturb their mental equilibrium.

Mariposa Marsh was strangely silent and preoccupied during the remainder of the night, while the three boys were correspondingly jolly, the effects of a natural reaction, and fraternized with the grim guardians of the peace, otherwise policemen, so effectually that their corner of the encampment was in an uproar most of the time.

Frank Freeman in particular was in high spirits. If asked, it would have puzzled him to answer why, but he felt much like one who is just coming under the influence of liquor, barely enough to make one feel wildly, recklessly gay.

Probably no person would have been more thoroughly surprised and incredulous than Frank at the assertion that the brief glimpse given him of May Brady was at the bottom of his unusual gayety, but nevertheless such was the truth. Frank was never in greater danger—of falling over head and ears in love!

Judge Brady and Map had long since retreated to the little hut, not to sleep, but to be alone together where they could converse and not make a public spectacle of their joy and gratitude over the happy deliverance from terrible peril.

The majority of the men lay down about the fires to sleep, but among the exceptions were Captain Cooper and our more immediate friends, none of whom felt the least inclined to woo the drowsy god.

As might naturally be expected, the captain was full of regrets that he had been unable to learn any-

thing definite concerning the secret store of Spring Steel before that worthy met his death. It was a fortune lost, and he could find time to think of nothing else.

"I did think that it was barely possible that he might have some clew about him—some note or memorandum of the hiding-place—but I searched him so closely that a flea couldn't have escaped my eye, and found nothing to pay me for my trouble. No doubt the secret is lost, and some day, maybe years from now, it will be stumbled on by some lucky rascal, who—"

When the captain spoke about a note or memorandum, Harold Freeman rose and strolled over to where the chief of the bushrangers lay when he planned his desperate stroke for liberty. Here he stooped, his cat-like eyes showing him almost immediately what he was looking for, and returning, he cut short Captain Cooper's reflections, by dropping a dirty, crumpled bit of paper into his hand.

"Possibly that is the thing you were so anxious to find, captain," he said in explanation, as all eyes were turned inquiringly upon him. "I noticed Spring Steel throw something away, just after the doctor unfastened his hands, but as I didn't see anything fall, I believed I was mistaken, until you spoke as you did just now."

Cooper unfolded the paper and smoothed it out with fingers that trembled despite his utmost efforts at self-control; but then a shade of disappointment chased the eager light from his eyes, as he saw nothing but an apparently aimless, meaningless jumble of letters and marks.

"He wouldn't try to hide it, though, unless it meant something, and was of importance," he said, more hopefully. "It's some sort of a secret cipher, or cryptograph, I reckon. If we only had the key! It may be a clew to the gold!"

The captain passed the paper around, but not one of the party could make head nor tail of its contents.

"There's a man on my force, though not here tonight, that can solve almost anything in the way of secret writing; I'll show it to him. The paper may be worth a princely fortune to us, after all!"

"You're welcome to my sheer!" laughed Mat, but Captain Cooper shook his head soberly.

"No; if anything comes of it, we will all share and sh're alike. You must give over your trip to Balarat and go back to Melbourne with me. The more I think about it, the more confident I feel that we have here the clew to the great treasure hidden by Spring Steel!"

Neither Mariposa Marsh nor the boys were easily won over to this view of the case. The first was too experienced, the others too young to be easily infected with the treasure-hunting mania; but Cooper argued with them earnestly.

"If it proves a sell, or if Bowen can't solve the cipher, it will only be a few days lost, and I promise to bear you company to the mines afterward," he said.

This pledge turned the scale, and the four adventurers agreed to bear him company back to Melbourne.

"Even if the paper should prove a fraud, we haven't done such a bad night's work," said Cooper, complacently. "Taking all together, there are over two thousand pounds in rewards for Spring Steel, and the other bushrangers are worth one hundred pounds each, dead or alive. Besides, the judge will come down handsomely. All in all, you have made more this night than you could do in six months toiling at the diggings."

"We've got back our own money an' our weapons," soberly replied Mariposa Marsh. "I speak for myself—an' I don't reckon but what the youngsters'll say the same—an' don't want nothin' more'n my own. No pay fer dad men in mine, thank ye all the same."

The prompt earnestness with which the three boys confirmed this decision told the captain that nothing

he might add would influence them, so he gracefully yielded.

"I have no such scruples, fortunately for my pocket. It is part of our calling, and helps to pay us for the risk we run every hour of our lives. It is no worse than for tiger or lion-hunters to take the reward offered for killing these animals—for the four-legged beasts are several degrees higher in the scale than these two-legged brutes."

Breakfast was prepared before daylight in order that all might take the road at an early hour, and the moment this duty was attended to, Mariposa Marsh prepared for business.

His thirst for revenge on the sergeant had by no means waxed less stubborn with the passage of time, and having already tried politeness, he now took more determined measures.

"Sergeant Morgan," he said, halting before that personage, "you treated me as no white man should treat another last night. That I am at least your equal in rank, my friend, Captain Cooper, will vouch for. That said, you have no excuse for refusing me satisfaction for the insults you put upon me when I was bound and helpless, unless it is that you are a coward. And even so, this may give you the lacking nerve!"

As he spoke, Mariposa Marsh stooped and grasped the rather prominent nose of the man addressed, then wrung it until the blood started freely.

With a roar like that of an enraged bull, Morgan started up and aimed a furious blow at his insulter with his clinched fist, but Mariposa Marsh ducked his head, stepped in and sent home his fists one after the other in swift succession, knocking him clean off his feet and through the camp-fire, each blow sounding like the sharp crack of a whip.

"What! fighting, gentlemen?" uttered an astonished voice, and Judge Brady, accompanied by his daughter, made their appearance around the corner of the brush screen.

Mariposa Marsh for the first time saw May Brady in a clear light, and a low, unearthly cry gurgled in his throat as he stood like one petrified, his face pale and distorted, his eyes protruding—the picture of terrible emotion—like one suddenly confronted by a ghost.

May shrunk back, terrified, she scarcely knew at what, while the father, no less puzzled, mechanically stepped before her, as though to defend her from some peril.

This action seemed to recall Mariposa Marsh to his senses, and with a sickly smile he lowered his eyes and turned away, muttering some incoherent words about being subject to fits.

It was well for him, perhaps, that Sergeant Morgan had been knocked completely out of time by those two fearful blows, for most assuredly the veteran was in no fit condition to renew the fight at that moment. A child could have mastered him then, as he sank down under a bush, tremblin' in every limb, cold sweat bedewing his forehead, his eyes fixed hungrily upon the maiden from under the shadow of his hat, his breath coming fast and chokingly.

Surely there was some deep mystery hidden beneath all this?

During the hours which they had passed together in converse, Judge Brady told his daughter all about the little party which had volunteered to go in search of her, and unwittingly awakened a strong curiosity in her bosom to see and know more of Frank Freeman—for the judge had been more particularly impressed with his bearing, and naturally enough had given a somewhat undue prominence to him in his narrative.

This curiosity awakened, of course it must be satisfied and May proposed to go and thank the young gentleman in person.

Although this did not exactly please the proud father, he could find no plausible reason for objecting, hence their appearance at that inopportune moment.

The judge, aided by Captain Cooper, managed to introduce May to the three boys, whom, we imagine, she immediately proceeded to make deliciously uncomfortable by overwhe mng them wih thanks and pretty speeches which flow so freely from fair lips. And equally as a matter of course, the lads were awkward and couldn't think of the right thing to say in answering her, looking as they did more like ragamuffins than respectable citizens. And yet, one at least of the trio, felt sorry when the interview was over, and the fairy-like vision turned away with the gray-haired judge.

Poor Frank! If he doubted before, he could do so no longer. He was over head and ears—yes, a thousand fathoms deep—in love.

Sergeant Morgan was able to mount his horse when the time came for them to set out on their return to Melbourne, but he looked far more fit for the hospital. As Mat Marley graphically expressed it, his face looked as though he had been caught tickling a mule's hind leg.

The wounded bushrangers were led away, bound upon the back of a horse, to finish their career in less than a month, by dancing on nothing, at the end of a rope apiece.

Nothing worthy of particular record occurred during the journey back to Melbourne, save that Captain Cooper, taking good care that none of the police should overhear his words, dwelt frequently upon the supposed clew to the golden treasure of Spring Steel, until he got his four friends nearly as much interested in the matter as he was himself.

When the city was reached, Mariposa Marsh had more than one long interview with Judge Henry Brady, and when he came from the last one his face wore an expression of purer joy and more perfect content than any of his young friends had ever beheld there before. Still they felt rather delicate about questioning him, knowing that in good time they would be told all there was for them to learn regarding the mystery which they felt sure connected the veteran and May Brady. And their trust was rewarded in due time, though a considerable time and many adventures of thrilling interest were fated to intervene.

And the golden treasure of Spring Steel? Was it ever discovered? Could Bowen solve the cryptogram which Captain Cooper so tenderly cherished?

To answer these questions satisfactorily would require a volume in itself, and lack of space forbids entering upon the task at present. The story we set out to tell is ended.

Whether or no the broken thread will again be taken up remains to be seen.

THE END.

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